

# ANNALI D'ITALIANISTICA

## Women Mystic Writers

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by

Dino S. Cervigni

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## *AdI* 1997 Italian Literature and Anthropology

Literature and anthropology have always shared much more than just common interests. Broadly defined as a body of writings in both prose and verse, literature is a major cultural manifestation of the human person, the same human person that is also the specific focus of study of anthropology. Literature itself has always drawn the interest of anthropologists, who recently have formally recognized the study of literature, or literary anthropology, in order to tap literature's richest sources of documentation for the synchronic and diachronic investigation of humankind's ideas and behaviors.

During the twentieth century, literature and anthropology have been brought closely together by several fundamental studies, among which the following should be mentioned: James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890; 1911-15); Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1923); Vladimir J. Propp's *Morphology of the Fable* (1928); Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949) and *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957); Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) with its myth-oriented archetypalism; Victor Turner's studies on liminality and rituals (*The Ritual Process* 1969; *Dramas, Fields and Metaphores* 1974); and René Girard's ongoing exploration of sacrificial themes (*Violence and the Sacred* 1977; *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* 1978; etc.).

The purpose of the literary anthropologist, on the one hand, is to employ literature to arrive at something that comes alive through the literary text, although it lies beyond it: namely, the reconstruction of the individual, group, and society represented by literature. The literary critic, on the other hand, focuses on anthropological themes and even exploits anthropological approaches in order more appropriately to interpret texts and thus more deeply to uncover their literariness. To be sure, *AdI* does not advocate adopting indiscriminately anthropological approaches to literature; rather, it encourages its prospective contributors to be aware of anthropology's theoretical concepts as they concentrate on such themes (typically associated with primitive human beings and societies) as, for instance, water, air, earth, and fire; rivers, plains, and mountains; birth, death, resurrection, and eternity; sin, fall, and redemption; science, magic, religion, and faith; myth, ritual, blood, and sacrifice; ethos, ethnos, and the notion of community and society; etc.

Accordingly, for its 1997 issue *AdI* solicits contributions from theorists and literary critics to investigate the multiple interconnections of literature and anthropology in their theoretical framework and literary manifestations, to explore some of the themes proposed above as well as others, and to apply warranted anthropological strategies to the interpretation of texts from all epochs of the history of the Italian literature (or in relation to it) in order to explore the texts' literariness.



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## Women Mystic Writers

In 1989 *Annali d'italianistica* devoted its seventh volume to "Women's Voices in Italian Literature" in order to analyze within an historical context methodological, ideological, and theoretical issues pertaining to this area of investigation. In this year's issue *AdI* returns to women's studies in a more specific field of research: mystical writings.

The phenomenon of mysticism has hardly identifiable boundaries, since many cultures lay claim to mystical experiences and their written expressions. The journal's Italian focus situates this investigation within Italy's plurimillenary Christian culture. Further limiting the phenomenon of mysticism and its written manifestations, *AdI* 1995 focuses on mystical writings by women.

Several studies have recently emphasized the need for further research in this area. The fundamental volume edited by Giovanni Pozzi and Claudio Leonardi, *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* (Genova: Marietti, 1988), introduces and anthologizes the writings of forty-five Italian women mystics, ranging from such medieval authors as Chiara d'Assisi (1193-1253), Beatrice I d'Este (ca. 1220-1226), and Umiliana Cerchi (1219-1246) to the contemporary Lucia Mangano (1896-1946), Maria Valtorta (1897-1961), and Angela Gavazzi (1907-1975). Following the historical, literary, and cultural parameters proposed by Pozzi and Leonardi, *AdI* 1995's nineteen contributions, ranging from Umiliana Cerchi (1219-1246) to Gemma Galgani (1878-1903), span Italy's literary culture from the chosen perspective of mystical writings by women.

All nineteen essays emphasize one fundamental principle: these women's mystical writings, however neglected or even wholly ignored they might have been in the past or might still be in the present, rightly belong to Italy's literary culture. These women mystics can rightly be considered *writers*. These women, in fact, have not only spoken and addressed an audience, either on the street or in convents, but they have also bequeathed important writings to all of us who are willing to read and listen. That they have oftentimes been unable to write these works without the assistance of others, either men or women, or that these writings fall short of those aesthetic norms imposed by a pluricentenary literary code can hardly justify the cultural prejudice surrounding religious writings in



general and mystical writings by women, especially illiterate or poorly educated women, in particular. Dealing with women mystic writers from the beginning to the twentieth century of Italy's cultural history, *AdI* 1995's nineteen essays address virtually every possible challenge confronting scholars of mysticism, from the ineffable and the power of the word, especially the word spoken by women, to the presence of the supernatural in writings that focus on the self and to the expression of woman in works that came to light through the assistance of male writers.

\* \* \*

Third in the anthology edited by Pozzi and Leonardi — after Chiara d'Assisi (1193-1253) and Beatrice I d'Este — Umiliana Cerchi, a lay woman, is known to us almost exclusively through the biography written in the year of her death by the friar Vito from Cortona. In her essay entitled "Umiliana e il suo biografo. Costruzione di un'agiografia femminile fra XIII e XIV secolo," Monica Cristina Storini focuses on this biography of Umiliana Cerchi. Storini seeks to bring to light the formation of new narrative modalities through a metaphoric linguistic system capable of transmitting the values inherent in this new expression of sanctity, embodied in a woman who had been married and, after becoming a widow, pursued spiritual perfection while remaining outside the walls of a cloister. Storini points out two fundamental narrative modalities in the friar's biography of this holy woman: the first and less extensive narrative modality illustrates those virtues Umiliana practiced during her married life that can also be proposed to the imitation of every good Christian woman; the second narrative modality characterizes Umiliana's peculiar sanctity, which manifests itself through the miracles of light, overcoming diabolical temptations, prophecies, and ecstatic raptures. Through these narrative modalities the biographer adapts Umiliana's new form of sanctity to traditional hagiographic models, which were available to him within the growing body of Franciscan literature. Thus the saint's body assumes a fundamental role. Just as it is through his stigmata that Francis becomes an *alter Christus*, an image of his conformity to Christ, Vito's biography of Umiliana reveals the values inherent in the holy woman's body through the language that seeks to preserve her physicality through time.

The issue of language takes on a peculiarly fundamental importance in mysticism, thus confirming the literariness of mystical writings beyond any one's doubt. On the one hand, in fact, mystical experiences' peculiar nature entails human beings' special relationship with God One and Triune and with God Incarnate; on the other hand, women mystics in the Middle Ages often relied on somebody else, primarily men, to put into writing their mystical experiences. Additional circumstances, such as the history of manuscripts, their diffusion, and the lack of reliable critical editions, time and again render mystical writings by



women extremely complex to assess, as the case is with Angela da Foligno (1248-1309).

An extremely interesting feminine figure who prayed for the death of her family members in order to follow Christ and described her mystical experiences to her confessor, Angela da Foligno has recently drawn the attention of many scholars. Two young contributors focus on her writings from different, yet converging perspectives.

In her essay entitled "Re-reading a Mis-known and Mis-read Mystic," Tiziana Arcangeli deals with Angela's work, which in the codex of Assisi bears the title of *Liber sororis Lellae de fulgineo de tertio ordinis sancti francisci*. Since the *Liber* was written by different scribes and no critical edition has been unquestionably accepted, Arcangeli asks to what extent we can still consider it as Angela's own work. Through an analysis of the transmission of its many codices, editions, different titles, divisions of the text, and the male writer's presence, Arcangeli shows how the original text has been altered throughout the centuries. Nevertheless, Angela's shapeless life account still resists the critics' attempt at imposing a structured form upon her work. The desire to systematize Angela's text goes back to the *frater scriptor*, who, in transcribing the mystic's words, sought to organize the amorphous verbal material offered to him by the woman *dictator*. And yet, the original circular nature of Angela's words transpires through the text in spite of the *frater scriptor*'s attempts at imposing on it a certain linear temporality. Thus Arcangeli views Angela's *Liber* within a context that is both historical and feminist, pointing out those elements in the *Liber* that seem to characterize mystical writings by women, particularly what lately has been referred to as body language. In Angela's case the practice of the *imitatio Christi* through the language of the body gave her the opportunity to make her "voice" heard in spite of many layers of patriarchal voices.

In the essay entitled "Carnal Metaphors and Mystical Discourse in Angela da Foligno's *Liber*," Mary Ann Sagnella also pursues the analysis of Angela da Foligno's language by focusing on the problematic of the female body. A textual analysis of the *Liber* shows how Angela's body appears as the most horrific reflection of the profane world. Indeed the problematic of the defiled female body frames her entire work. Angela reviles, condemns, and tortures her body in an attempt to destroy what she believes is most shameful and putrid, to then shed the burden of the flesh and become herself dissolved in her mystical union with the Other-as-Christ. And yet, ultimately her experience appears as both somatic and tactile, for bodily knowledge releases a discourse rich in metaphors of birth, decay, food, and the body, while also disclosing the paradoxes and intensity of her religious experience within the wider realm of medieval piety.

Next, the nucleus of five essays on Catherine of Siena that appear in *AdI* 1995 attests not only to the centrality that Catherine has always occupied in Italy's and Europe's cultural history, but also to the renewed importance that her

opus and figure are increasingly assuming because of new theoretical interests and perspectives. Complementing each other, these five essays illustrate various aspects of Catherine as an active participant in political and civic affairs, a mystic, a writer, and a model woman.

In her essay entitled "Candied Oranges, Vinegar, and Dawn: The Imagery of Conversion in the Letters of Caterina of Siena," Karen Scott, an historian, first focuses on the events surrounding the composition of three letters during the summer of 1378. She then analyzes them in order to illustrate Catherine's conception of Christian life and particularly her view of conversion through images she invents and develops. By taking metaphors from ordinary life and juxtaposing contrasting images, Catherine suggests that the mystic waits for God with pain and hope, drawing nearer to Him only through an ongoing conversion and with full acceptance of the complexity and paradoxes of human existence.

In the second essay on Catherine, "The Physical in the Mystical Writings of Catherine of Siena," Suzanne Noffke, who with admirable energy and accuracy has been translating the Saint's works into English, focuses on an aspect of the mystic's writings — the physical and the body — that contemporary theorists have found as particularly revealing of womanhood's manifestations. According to Noffke, Catherine's mysticism contains, by her own testimony, a large dose of the ecstatic and the visionary, of vividly imagined and physically experienced communication with the heavenly, of physically acted out devotion and asceticism. Yet an examination that relies primarily on Catherine's surviving writings rather than on hagiographic sources demonstrates that she recounts physically vivid mystical experiences, introduces images, and weaves them into the fabric of her discourse, not as a constituent of her relationship with God but as an elucidation of a view of God and human spirituality that at once incorporates and transcends the physical.

Next, in an essay entitled "The Written Woman Writes: Caterina da Siena between History and Hagiography, Body and Text," Claudia Rattazzi Papka also focuses on the presence of body and spirit in Catherine from a novel perspective. Rattazzi Papka, in fact, seeks to distinguish between Caterina da Siena as a historical woman and a mystic and Saint Caterina as a textual construct within the genre of hagiography. This distinction can be rearticulated by exploring Catherine's self-construction as a saint in her own writings and comparing this self-construction to the saint's representation in the hagiographic tradition. Such an analysis shows that the latter, which depends on a male tradition, insistently sunders the integrated mystical persona Catherine carefully sets forth, particularly dichotomizing "body" and "head," physicality and spirituality, learning and ecstasy, woman and saint. The imposition of such a dualism reveals the pervasive cultural anxieties in writing female bodies as becomes evident in the later Middle Ages. Progressively subverting such anxieties and the textual expectations they produce, Catherine writes her own body at the center of the

text of her life as a saint.

In the fourth essay on Catherine, "Lettere di Caterina da Siena: il testo, la tradizione, l'interpretazione," Marina Zancan focuses on the fundamental role that Catherine's epistolary writings have played throughout Italy's literary culture, extolling their exemplarity as "segments of the history of a text and feminine intellectuality" ("come segmenti di storia del testo e dell'intellettualità femminile"). Zancan points out the many issues surrounding the history of Catherine's 383 letters: their authenticity (hardly questionable at their origin), the history of their transmission (which subjects them to some form of rewriting), and their content, which centers on the perfect love for Christ attained through the knowledge of the self. Most importantly — Zancan emphasizes — Catherine's letters, while seeking to express the mystical and the holy, which are per se ineffable, and while addressing men and women of all social strata, emphasize herself as the subject of her writing and the power of the written word that Catherine claims she has received from God's mercy.

In the last article on this mystic, Jane Chance's "St. Catherine of Siena in Late Medieval Britain: Feminizing Literary Reception through Gender and Class" further elucidates the importance and role that Catherine's writings and figure assumed outside Italy after her death in 1380, particularly as a result of her canonization in 1461. Chance focuses specifically on the reading and convent life of women in fifteenth and sixteenth-century England and Scotland. Class and gender differences evident in the Middle English translations of her *Dialogo* and her *Vita* appealed to her English readers, both male and female, and therefore both reflected and contributed to the democratization of religious literary production and the feminization of the Church in the late Middle Ages outside Italy. In the *Orchard of Syon*, the unifying image of the bridge symbolizes Christ as mediator between human and divine, lowest and highest of social classes, languages of humble vernacular and learned Latin, female and male. Representing the sacraments of the Church, especially Holy Communion, Christ's Body is transformed into a bridge, its bricks and mortar, thereby coming to be identified with Catherine herself. Thus, after receiving the stigmata, Catherine also mediates spiritually and culturally, through her own book, and in the Middle English version of her *Lyf*, between women and the patriarchal institution of the Church.

A follower and in many respects an imitator of Catherine, Francesca Romana (1384-1440) is the focus of Laura Fortini's contribution. Fortini analyzes not only the saint's efforts to alleviate the sufferings of Rome's many poor and sick through a life of charity that was not isolated from the city's turbulent history, but also the way her spiritual and mystical experiences are rendered through the writings of her confessor and spiritual director Giovanni Mattiotti. As in all mystical writings, the issue of writing is paramount in the case of Francesca Romana. It concerns not only the actual description of her life and her mystical experiences, done by her confessor after her death, and the way



in which such posthumous renderings truly represent Francesca Romana's life, but also the extent in which the saint's spirituality and mysticism were nurtured by the religious community of women she founded and by her active involvement in her native city's history. Fortini thus emphasizes that, like Catherine of Siena, Francesca Romana, through both her community life and mysticism, becomes empowered to spread her own word in the world.

One of the more interesting examples of Quattrocento mysticism is Caterina Vegri, Saint Catherine of Bologna (1423-1463), whose autobiographical treatise entitled *Sette armi spirituali* is the focus of Jane Tylus's essay. An autobiographical account of Catherine's struggles to recognize the deceptiveness of a Satan who appeared to the mystic in the form of Mary and Christ, the "Sette armi" attests both to the potential dangers of a late medieval piety that embraced the reproductivity of the sacred and to a growing distrust of mystical experience. Strikingly, one of the warriors to emerge as a model for Catherine is the Virgin Mary, whom the saint casts as a suspicious annunciate, armed with the weapon of Scripture as she ponders whether Gabriel is a true or demonic angel. Mary's powers of discernment and her maternal sympathies make of her not only an exemplary mystic but an ideal abbess who cares for the well-being of her daughters. Thus the *Sette armi spirituali* is a crucial document for understanding how late medieval women were able to construct Christ's mother as a model for their own spiritual exercises — one which the Counter-Reformation would render largely obsolete, as Tylus's closing remarks on Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* and a reference to a Tintoretto annunciation suggest.

Coming into contact with the supernatural, the inscrutable, and the ineffable Other, the mystics nevertheless seek to express it, and in so doing they also express themselves. Most of the essays in this volume analyze the ways in which female mystics fashion themselves, or are fashioned by others, when describing their mystical experiences. Most essays elucidate the female mystic's power in the word to represent herself as a subject (and hence her claim to the word, both spoken and written), even when the subject is represented by others.

Dealing with issues of representation, the three following essays — the first by Gabriel Niccoli on Caterina Vannini of Siena (1562-1606), the other two by Armando Maggi and Karen-edis Barzman on Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi (1566-1604) — confront issues that concern the subject's representation (Niccoli, Maggi, Barzman), orality, writing, and the mystic's audience (Maggi).

In his essay entitled "Shaping Fantasies: Writing as Re-Vision in Caterina Vannini's Correspondence," Niccoli focuses on Caterina Vannini's collection of letters, written within roughly the last two years of her life and addressed to a powerful and privileged interlocutor, Cardinal Federico Borromeo (1564-1631). Niccoli views this correspondence as the Siennese mystic's attempt to ascribe order and coherence to her life's account. She attains this goal by providing a commentary to, and thus shaping, past and present mystical events as well as her life's fantasies according to a rhetorical strategy reminiscent of the hermeneutic



tradition of prose commentaries on verse texts. Vannini's real text, according to Niccoli, is the often inexpressible and voiceless awareness of both her mystical experience and her amorous raptures for the beloved Cardinal. This type of rhetorical rereading of Vannini's letters, which was the object of considerable acrimonious resistance in past literary discourse, and (in Niccoli's view) is alone best suited for a total recuperation of the Vanninian text. In shaping fantasies, the mystic nun from Siena desires to offer a systematized fashioning of herself and of her text that would in turn shape the complicitous response of her private and privileged male reader, thus inscribing in her own life's account the double image of nymph and saint.

Focusing on another woman whose life bridges the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, Armando Maggi, in "The Voice and the Silences of Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi," examines the Saint's utterances as they have arrived to us through *I colloqui*, the transcription of her spoken discourses by her fellow nuns during her ecstasies. Maggi argues that we cannot examine the content of Maria Maddalena's words without also taking into account their orality. The mystic in fact believes that the Word asks her to express His being through oral language. Maggi therefore studies the mystic's interpretation of language and the relationship between the text's oral and written levels. Maggi holds that the actual meaning of *I colloqui* lies in its covert orality. Referring both to Husserl's and Rovatti's philosophical theories, he believes that, in order to perceive this mystical work's meaning, one must perform a different form of reading. The author in fact submits that *I colloqui* "is not a book simply to be read, but rather a book to experience," for it ultimately proposes both the subject's power to represent herself and the reader's ability to perceive that self-representation.

This notion of representation, on the other hand, is challenged in the following essay by Karen-edis Barzman, who situates the epistemological status of representation, through either language or other forms, within a broader cultural context. In "Cultural Production, Religious Devotion, and Subjectivity in Early Modern Italy: The Case Study of Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi," Barzman seeks to broaden the discussion of women and cultural production by focusing on the signifying practices through which performative subjects enter visual and textual culture. In considering the case of this sixteenth/seventeenth-century mystic, Barzman attempts to recuperate agency, or a theory of the self, while refusing notions of essential or authentic subjectivity. She argues that what is often taken as subjective expression actually constitutes a representation of received and recognizable categories of identity. Inflections of this "script" are possible in culturally contingent ways. Thus the inherited frame of reference becomes a potential site for subjective maneuvering within normative roles, and the distinctions between produced and received representation collapse. The foundation of such subjective possibilities rests on the ability of signs (e.g., "Mary Magdalen") to absorb multiple meanings, as the case of Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi demonstrates. To be sure, Barzman, who moves within (but seemingly

also criticizes) a Marxian art historical discourse, states that she has “no unmediated access to the intentions of the woman who spoke as ‘Sister Mary Magdalen,’” although the author does not “deny her [Sister Mary Magdalen’s] intentionality or agency. . . .” Barzman concludes by proposing that “To theorize production and reception (even with respect to interpretation) *outside* the terms of art historical discourse is an enabling step — perhaps the first necessary step — towards a rethinking of cultural production and agency, including our own.”

Both Caterina Vannini of Siena (1562-1606) and Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi (1566-1604) have taken us past the epoch that follows the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which sets up normative guidelines for the development of that form of spirituality within which mysticism grows. From now on, according to Leonardi (*Scrittrici mistiche italiane* 54-56), prophecy and external manifestations are shunned. Emphasis is placed on the mystics’ ecclesiastical association (they are mostly nuns) and on their efforts not to renovate the Church in a direct manner, as Saint Catherine of Siena and many others sought to do, but rather to pursue, in silent and obedient isolation, a feminine life modeled upon the cross. Maria Domitilla Galluzzi (1595-1671) and Veronica Giuliani (1660-1727) exemplify such a transformation of mystical experiences.

In her essay, “Tra *eros* e *caritas*: le ‘pene’ d’amore di Maria Domitilla Galluzzi,” Olimpia Pelosi follows the autobiographical itinerary of this seventeenth-century nun in order to trace the most salient aspects of her mystical experiences: abjection as a means to reach spiritual perfection, the complex relationship body/word, and the ambivalence between *eros* and *caritas*. The mystic’s language takes on erotic overtones as she seeks to express her *caritas*. At the same time, she subjects her body to excruciating pains and horrific humiliations in order to become one with the beloved.

One of the most disconcerting figures in the history of Italy’s mystical writings, according to Pozzi and Leonardi (*Scrittrici mistiche italiane* 505), Veronica Giuliani (1660-1727) is the focus of Monique Courbat’s essay, “Veronica Giuliani: scrittura e riscrittura.” Courbat, who has devoted a book-length study to this mystic, focuses on the literary nature and genre of Veronica Giuliani’s mystical writings. Almost illiterate, the mystic learns how to write as she obeys the orders of her many confessors, who from 1693 until shortly before her death make her write the story of her mystical experiences, and thus of her life, time and again commanding her to start from childhood. Focusing on the saint’s autobiographical writings and *diario* and relying on contemporary criticism of these genres, Courbat emphasizes the exceptional nature of the mystic’s writings. In fact Courbat points out that, whereas only a few authors have written more than one autobiography, Veronica Giuliani (as her confessors succeeded each other and renewed their requests) has left behind no fewer than five autobiographies. Furthermore, she writes not only a “single” journal of her mystical experiences (“un diario unico”) but she at times splits it into two contemporaneous parts or even doubles it (“lo sdoppia o lo raddoppia”). Finally,



in addition to a narrative in the first person typical of autobiographical writings, Veronica Giuliani employs not only the third person (which is rare in autobiographies) but also the second person (when the Blessed Virgin dictates to Veronica the mystic's life): a unique feature in autobiographical writings.

Focusing on the same mystic, Massimo Lollini's essay, "Scrittura obbediente e mistica tridentina in Veronica Giuliani," studies the mysticism of Veronica Giuliani in the context of Baroque culture. On the one hand, Lollini analyzes a work by Cardinal Federico Borromeo (1564-1631) on women's mysticism, *De ecstaticis mulieribus et illulis* (1616); on the other hand, Lollini also focuses on the idea of nothingness as it develops in Veronica Giuliani's mystical writings and Giuseppe Castiglione's *Discorso academico in lode del Niente* (1632). Lollini's essay also reflects on the notion of "obedient writing" and its relevance to the idea of literary autobiography. In conclusion, Lollini, echoing Giovanni Getto, outlines serious theoretical issues that confront the literary scholars who deal with mystical writings.

Before introducing the nineteenth-twentieth-century mystic Gemma Galgani (1878-1903), we can briefly reflect on the main characteristics of the female mystic emerging throughout the post-Tridentine epoch. As Claudio Leonardi writes in his introduction to the volume *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* (43-57), after the Council of Trent (1545-1563) the prophecy and the involvement in civic, political and ecclesiastical affairs that characterize medieval and Renaissance female mystics, all but disappear. Female mystics are nuns who live cloistered lives, obey their confessors' prescriptions, and their mystical focus is Christ crucified who demands of them total annihilation of body and spirit. Such a model remains valid until the twentieth century. Gemma Galgani, a lay person who lives a peculiar kind of cloistered life outside the convent and oftentimes objects to her confessor, ushers in a new kind of female mystical experience.

In "Visions of the Mystic / Mystical Visions: Interpretations and Self-Interpretations of Gemma Galgani (1878-1903)," Cristina Mazzoni explores two aspects of the story of Gemma Galgani. In the first half Mazzoni examines two kinds of "visions" or "interpretations" of Gemma: the diagnoses of medical discourse and the glorification of hagiography. What becomes apparent in this process is that from both medical and religious perspectives Gemma has elicited a bodily hermeneutics that has usually been deployed at the expense of her verbal self-interpretations. A certain collusion can be perceived, then, between medical and religious interpretations of Gemma in spite of the apparent irreconcilability of their paradigms. This collusion depends on a common objectifying vision by medicine and religion, equally aimed at turning the mystic's opaque body into the transparent site of a strategy of control. Nonetheless, Gemma can and indeed should be studied without falling into the ahistorical essentialism of her adorers but also without yielding to her antagonists' hysterizing operation. To such readings, the second part of Mazzoni's essay juxtaposes a reading of Gemma's writings, her own "mystical vision" or "self-interpretation," where she

recuperates her worldly powerlessness into a strategy of spiritual and physical self-control that permanently destabilizes her interpreters' visual reductions.

With Gemma Galgani (1878-1903) we have reached our time. Other women mystics, who have also resorted to writing and who belong predominantly or wholly to the twentieth century, have followed her: the Piedmontese Benigna Consolata Ferrero (1885-1916), a nun, who wrote a *Diario*; the Sicilian Lucia Mangano (1896-1946), a secular Ursuline, who wrote an *Autobiografia* and letters, and whose confessor left descriptions of her mystical and intellectual experiences called *Diari*; the Lombard-Campanian Maria Valtorta (1897-1961), a lay woman who, according to Pozzi and Leonardi, was seized by a *raptus scribendi* and wrote more than fifteen thousand pages (*Scrittrici mistiche* 700); and finally, in Pozzi's and Leonardi's *Scrittrici mistiche*, the Lombard Angela Gavazzi, a nun who was born and died in the twentieth century (1907-1975) and who left behind epistolary and autobiographical writings.

Two essays conclude this volume: one by Gaetana Marrone on the figure of Chiara d'Assisi in Liliana Cavani's film *Francesco* (1989), and the other by Cristina Mazzoni, a bibliographical essay on mysticism.

Since mystical phenomena challenge the spoken and written word's expressive capabilities, as we have seen, what possibilities are open to the twentieth-century medium par excellence, cinema, to render the mystic's experiences? In her essay entitled "Ideologia, creatività e iconografia nella Chiara di Liliana Cavani," Gaetana Marrone examines not only the cinematic ways in which Liliana Cavani renders a medieval mystic figure in her second film of Saint Francis of Assisi but also the film director's understanding and cinematic representation of a model female figure who is a mystic and a saint. Liliana Cavani's point of departure is the philological investigation of historical sources on Chiara d'Assisi. From such research Cavani proceeds to recreate cinematically the figure of a woman who transcends the Franciscan parameters of saintity and mysticism based on an all-pervasive male model: Saint Francis. In rendering the life of Francis and Chiara, Cavani's film exploits the overarching medieval metaphor that represents human life, the journey, which becomes paradigmatic of Chiara's mystical experience. Most importantly, Liliana Cavani's film, according to Gaetana Marrone, identifies (and thus also illustrates) in Chiara the *antesignana* or forerunner of feminine perfection, thereby becoming the subject of an experience that is both creative and charismatic.

Cristina Mazzoni's bibliographical essay appropriately concludes this volume on mystical writings by women. In keeping with *Adl*'s long-standing tradition of providing fundamental research tools, Mazzoni's essay intends to guide the reader through the maze of books and articles on mystical studies and in particular on women mystic writers. Divided into sections, the essay's first part is a general introduction to Italian women's mysticism, while the second part lists chronologically women mystic writers providing for each author primary and secondary sources in Italian and English.



In conclusion, *AdI* 1995's nineteenth essays on women mystic writers analyze the most salient issues now confronting mystical writings by women, primarily: The specific cultural place of women mystics; the peculiar nature of women's mysticism, as reflected in their writings, which has been viewed as either an annihilation of the self (De Beauvoir) or the only *locus* Western history has in the past accorded women to speak or act in a public manner (Irigaray); the language of women's mystical writings; historical, hermeneutic, and literary analyses of women mystics' writings; archival research aimed at bringing to the light unknown or little known mystical writings or reediting texts deformed by what Pozzi and Leonardi call "filologia caritativa" (13); the literary genres of women's mystical writings; women's mystical writings and the literary canon; and finally, the issue of women mystics and the Other. Thus *Adi* 1995 on women mystic writers offers both an invitation and a challenge to readers in the English speaking world and in Italy to return once again to, remove the dust from, or discover mystical writings by women in order to understand more fully Italy's variegated literary culture.

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## Umiliana e il suo biografo. Costruzione di un'agiografia femminile fra XIII e XIV secolo

### 1. La vita e la leggenda

Celebrata per secoli come fondatrice del Terzo Ordine francescano,<sup>1</sup> Umiliana dei Cerchi ha conosciuto in tempi più recenti un drastico ridimensionamento storiografico che, privandola del diritto di primogenitura, ha indicato in lei soltanto un comodo *exemplum* da consegnare alla devozione popolare.<sup>2</sup> Donna che senza uscire dal “secolo” aveva compiutamente condotto a termine la *sequela Christi*, Umiliana — o meglio il modello che la sua vita ben presto divenne — rappresentò un utile strumento contro l'eresia dilagante soprattutto fra il sesso femminile.

Ma della sua realtà biografica quasi nulla venne conservato alla memoria, se si escludono pochi elementi essenziali, presto trasfigurati nei *topoi* e nei motivi cari alla tradizione agiografica e alla pratica didattica della predicazione.<sup>3</sup> Figlia di

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<sup>1</sup> Testimonianza del protrarsi del culto nei secoli sono, ad esempio, gli ampi ed eruditi studi storici compiuti alla fine del Seicento da Cionacci F., *Compendio della vita della beata Umiliana de' Cerchi* e *Storia della beata Umiliana de' Cerchi*. Sulla devozione cfr. la voce di Sciamannini R., *Cerchi, Umiliana dei*, nonché Franco M. R., *La beata Umiliana de' Cerchi* e Vauchez A., *La santità nel Medioevo* 169 e 207-09.

<sup>2</sup> Gli approfondimenti storici si debbono soprattutto a Davidsohn R., *Storia di Firenze*, II. *Guelfi e ghibellini* 180-88; Lazzeri Z., *La B. Umiliana dei Cerchi* 196-206; Meersseman G. G., *Dossier de l'ordre de la Pénitence* 179; Bertagna M., *Sul Terz'Ordine francescano in Toscana nel sec. XIII*; Benvenuti Papi A., *Umiliana dei Cerchi; Il modello familiare nella agiografia fiorentina; Frati mendicanti e pinzochere in Toscana*; e Vauchez A., *La santità nel Medioevo*.

<sup>3</sup> Sulla leggenda sacra si vedano almeno: Jolles A., *Forme semplici* 30-62; Boesch Gajano S. (a c. di), *Agiografia altomedievale; Agiografia nell'Occidente cristiano; Aspetti dell'agiografia nell'alto medioevo*. Un profilo metodologico ha tracciato Leonardi C., *L'agiografia latina dal Tardoantico all'Alto medioevo*. Numerosissimi poi gli studi relativi agli usi e costumi della predicazione medievale. Rimandiamo soltanto a Delcorno C., *La predicazione nell'età comunale; Il racconto*



primo letto di Oliviero (Vieri, Ulivieri), allora sposato, probabilmente, con una Portinari, Umiliana era nata a Firenze nel 1219, forse secondogenita di sette fratelli. Nel 1234, all'età di quindici anni, venne data in sposa a un Bonaguisi o ad un Mazzaracoli. Rimasta vedova dopo cinque anni di matrimonio — e almeno due figlie —, visse da reclusa nella torre di famiglia, sotto la guida spirituale del francescano fra Michele degli Alberti, fino alla morte avvenuta il 19 maggio 1246.<sup>4</sup>

Tra questi scarni dati materiali trova spazio la leggenda, con una dovizia di particolari, di testimonianze, di pretese di veridicità davvero sorprendenti. Costituitasi a partire dalla *Vita* prima, redatta, poco tempo dopo la morte in “odore di santità”, da Vito da Cortona,<sup>5</sup> essa fu ben presto arricchita da una raccolta di miracoli, da altri resoconti biografici e dai relativi volgarizzamenti.<sup>6</sup>

L'intero *corpus* rappresenta tuttora una tra le più antiche agiografie dedicate a quelle che altri hanno denominato le *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*.<sup>7</sup> Il rifiuto del cibo, l'alimentazione eucaristica, la meditazione della Passione di Cristo, l'ascesi rigorosa, simile a quella prescelta dai Padri del deserto — per citare solo alcuni degli elementi unanimemente indicati come pratiche essenziali delle grandi mistiche, dal XIV al XVI secolo — sono già presenti nella *Vita* di Umiliana, che non a caso è stata indicata come uno dei probabili modelli della dantesca *Vita nuova*.<sup>8</sup>

agiografico nella predicazione dei secoli XIII-XIV e dello stesso, per i collegamenti con il racconto esemplare, *Exemplum e letteratura*.

<sup>4</sup> Si veda la fondamentale voce di Benvenuti Papi A., *Cerchi, Umiliana (Emiliana)*, a cui rimandiamo anche per gli ulteriori approfondimenti bibliografici.

<sup>5</sup> Su Vito da Cortona cfr. Waddingus L., *Scriptores Ordinis Minorum* 220 e Sbaraglia G. G., *Supplementum et castigatio* 162.

<sup>6</sup> La copia più antica della *Vita* (forse addirittura duecentesca) è contenuta nel ms. Laurenziano pluteo XXVII destro, cod. XI della Biblioteca Mediceo-Laurenziana di Firenze e venne pubblicata, col titolo *Vita auctore Vito Cortonensi coaevo, Ordinis Minorum*, negli *Acta sanctorum*. Seguono: i *Miracula* redatti dal francescano Ippolito da Firenze, sicuramente successivi al 1249 (anch'essi traditi dal ms. Laurenziano citato); un compendio della vita; un'altra *Vita* scritta da Raffaele Maffei da Volterra e alcuni documenti relativi al processo di canonizzazione del 1625. Il tutto è preceduto da un *Commentarius De B. Aemiliana seu Humiliana*. Per i volgarizzamenti, invece, cfr. almeno Moreni D. (a c. di), *Leggenda della beata Umiliana de' Cerchi*, e il più recente De Luca G. (a c. di), *Prosatori minori del Trecento* 721-68. Questo stesso testo è stato riprodotto in De Luca (a c. di), *Scrittori di religione del Trecento* 363-410, da cui citiamo. Un compendio in volgare del XIV secolo è stato pubblicato da Battelli G., *La leggenda della beata Umiliana de' Cerchi*.

<sup>7</sup> Pozzi G. e Leonardi C. (a c. di), *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*. Terza in ordine cronologico, subito dietro Chiara d'Assisi (1193-1253) e Beatrice I d'Este (1200 ca.-1226), e prima di Umiltà da Faenza (1226-1310), Umiliana dei Cerchi occupa le pagine 80-93, 691 e 714.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Branca V., *Poetica del rinnovamento e tradizione agiografica* 134-40 e Guglielminetti M., *Biografia ed autobiografia* 837-40.

Concepito agli albori del movimento francescano, l'esperimento di Vito da Cortona rappresenta il primo tentativo di inserire nel solco della tradizione la santità eslege di Umiliana, donna e laica, adattando, trasformando, manipolando i moduli agiografici antichi, per quanto è possibile e secondo le capacità letterarie dell'autore, invero piuttosto modeste. Analizzarne il testo, al di là dello specifico valore letterario, significa dunque cogliere allo stato embrionale il formarsi di una modalità narrativa che è, innanzi tutto, delineazione di un nuovo sistema linguistico e metaforico, nell'accezione più ampia del termine.

Divenuta essa stessa tradizione, sarà proprio questa struttura — di linguaggio, di forma, di contenuto — a garantire la durata e la trasmissione dei valori espressi dalla mistica femminile, sempre pericolosamente in bilico fra deriva eretica e rigorismo ortodosso.

## 2. "Posuit eam super candelabrum": da "madre pietosa" a "sposa di Cristo"

La narrazione di Vito da Cortona appare contraddistinta da una struttura piuttosto rigida e precisa, coincidente — nel testo tradito dagli *Acta sanctorum* — con le sette articolazioni principali: un prologo (che elenca gli oltre trenta *testes veritatis* della santità d'Umiliana e delle sue *gesta*) e sei capitoli, rispettivamente dedicati al periodo compreso fra la conversione e la vedovanza (I, 2—9, 387—89);<sup>9</sup> all'assunzione dell'*habitus tertii Ordinis* e alle tentazioni (II, 10—21, 389—92); al catalogo delle virtù salvifiche: umiltà, penitenza, devozione (III, 22—33, 392—94); alle estasi, alle profezie e ai miracoli (IV, 34—43, 394—97); alla malattia ultima e al transito felice (V, 44—57, 397—400), per concludersi con le apparizioni *post obitum* (VI, 58—62, 400—1).

Come molti degli agiografi che l'hanno preceduto — e come la maggior parte di quelli che lo seguiranno —, Vito non si preoccupa affatto di rispettare lo svolgimento dei fatti, quanto di riordinare gli eventi secondo una diversa scansione, che contrappone alla temporalità mondana le tappe di un superiore cammino di salvezza, immagine della predestinazione divina.<sup>10</sup> Ciò gli consente, tra l'altro, di omettere quasi completamente ogni riferimento all'infanzia della

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. l'edizione della *Vita* in *Acta sanctorum*, di cui do sempre fra parentesi l'indicazione relativa, nell'ordine, ai numeri di capitolo, paragrafo e pagina. Nelle citazioni riportate nel testo rendo con *et* la nota tironiana, scioglio le abbreviazioni e modernizzo la punteggiatura.

<sup>10</sup> Interessanti rapporti numerologici vengono stabiliti fra le singole fasi della *Vita* umiliana. La conversione si verifica ad un mese di distanza dalle nozze. Dopo cinque anni di matrimonio e un anno di vedovanza, torna nella casa paterna, dove, dopo aver trascorso ancora un anno, sceglie la reclusione nella torre. Qui, a partire dal secondo anno e per un totale di sette, riceverà il dono delle lacrime, subirà le tentazioni demoniache, sarà oggetto di miracoli e di visioni, otterrà lo spirito di profezia e raggiungerà il culmine della grazia con il rapimento estatico.

beata e di avviare il proprio racconto a partire dalla *conversio* vera e propria, coincidente con il mese successivo all'ingresso nello stato matrimoniale.

Se può apparire del tutto superfluo ricordare come le nozze rappresentassero per la società medievale l'assunzione di un ruolo preciso da parte della donna (che cessava d'essere membro improduttivo della comunità per divenire oggetto di scambio in virtù della capacità di procreazione e dell'occupazione nel tempo di cura), non sembra però del tutto inopportuno riflettere sul fatto che tale momento coincideva anche con la conoscenza sessuale, cioè con il grado di massima immersione nella carne e nel peccato secondo una prospettiva cristiana plurisecolare.

È questo il primo dei problemi che il biografo si trova ad affrontare senza la possibilità di ricorrere agli elementi noti della tradizione agiografica: pur essendo estremamente plausibile da un punto di vista religioso, la conversione d'Umiliana avveniva all'interno — e senza la rimozione — di uno *status* (la vita matrimoniale) in netto contrasto con la stessa scelta devota, impedendone la rinuncia completa al mondo.<sup>11</sup> Costretto ad accettare una componente di “mondanità” nella vita della beata — per quanto ridotta a minima parte (“vestimentorum cultus, quae ob viri reverentiam portabat, erant sibi non ad gaudium, sed ad crucem tantum” I, 2, 387) —, la preoccupazione principale di Vito è di descrivere come si espliciti la fede d'una donna che ha perduto la propria verginità e, persistendo nello stato coniugale, può praticare solo la castità del suo stato.

Costretto ad abbandonare la fonte evangelica con il venir meno dell'*imitatio Christi*, il biografo finisce col ricorrere ai modelli di santità disponibili e la scelta cade su san Martino, vale a dire su quel tipo di pietà che metà conserva per la propria sopravvivenza e metà dà ai bisognosi.<sup>12</sup>

La metà è l'orpello che lega ancora Umiliana al mondo e che rende la sua conversione, appunto, dimidiata. Non potendo richiamarsi a Cristo, santo per eccellenza e d'ogni santo modello da imitare, la beata resta vincolata ad un grado intermedio che è imitazione di chi imita Dio. Ed in effetti, in questa prima parte del racconto, la narrazione agiografica non si discosta dalla descrizione della condotta di vita di ogni “buona cristiana”, secondo un catalogo di azioni che

<sup>11</sup> Per un'interpretazione diversa dell'episodio cfr. Del Lungo I., *Nei primi secoli del Comune* 20-21 e Vauchez A., *I laici nel Medioevo* 216.

<sup>12</sup> È probabile che a determinare la scelta abbia influito anche il fatto che a san Martino era dedicata la parrocchia d'appartenenza della beata: “Questa visione poi ebbe più volte, sia in cella, sia nella Chiesa di S. Martino, quella dei Buonuomini, che allora aveva la sua facciata dalla parte contraria a quella di oggi, e cioè nell'attuale Piazza dei Cimatori, che era la sua parrocchia, e fu poi la parrocchia di Dante” (Lazzeri Z., *La B. Umiliana dei Cerchi* 203). La predicazione elargita dal pulpito della chiesa durante le funzioni religiose avrà sicuramente insistito sull'*exemplum* di santa vita costituito dalla biografia del vescovo di Tours. Sul modello martiniano si veda Leonardi C., *I modelli dell'agiografia latina dall'epoca antica al Medioevo* 447-50.



finisce col costituirsi semplicemente attorno al voto di sovvenire ai poveri “in vestiendo nudos, in refocillando debiles, in visitando infirmos, compatiendo miseris” (I, 2, 387). Umiliana elargisce il cibo più raffinato (“Multa bona cibaria subtrahebat latenter ab ore suo et recondebat, ut ea pauperibus distribueret. Per se autem vili cibo contenta erat” I, 4, 387) e gli avanzzi di pane; distribuisce gli abiti vecchi del marito, le lenzuola del letto e i panni propri in sovrappiù (giubba di seta, bende, gonnelle, ecc.). Si priva cioè del superfluo; mentre il resto viene prodotto direttamente dal lavoro delle sue mani, cucendo e cucinando quanto occorre. Ciò che preoccupa l'autore è piuttosto allontanare dalla beata ogni ombra di scandalo, affrettandosi a precisare: “et quidquid aliud habere potuit, bono modo pauperibus erogavit” (I, 3, 387).<sup>13</sup>

È evidente che in tale contesto l'unico modello attivabile, come ben interpreta il volgarizzamento trecentesco, è quello della “pietosa madre”,<sup>14</sup> sulla falsariga di un sentimento caritatevole che accomuna tutti coloro che soffrono e che hanno sofferto. Ed infatti, la pietà umiliana è prodotto innanzi tutto della propria esperienza dolorifica, del proprio umano esperire, sul quale si costruisce anche la possibilità di comprendere ed accettare la prescrizione neotestamentaria:

Speciali compassione movebatur circa infirmos, sciens quantis indigeant, quia saepe infirmabatur graviter: et intendebat propter illud Evangelicum: “Quod uni ex minimis meis fecistis mihi fecistis. . .”<sup>15</sup>

(I, 5, 387)

La maternità spirituale diviene anzi alternativa alla maternità reale, secondo un capovolgimento tipicamente cristiano del senso comune, che rappresenta come lecito e desiderabile ciò che per il mondo è follia: Umiliana auspica la morte dei propri figli per consegnarli, attraverso la trasfigurazione sublimante d'un “transito” puro e santo, alla vita vera:<sup>16</sup>

Si quando infirmarentur pueruli sui, non erat multum sollicita, nec turbaretur de morte ipsorum, sed aiebat dicens: “O quam beati essent, si tam immaculati discederent, sic secum virginitatem portantes. Potius volo quod moriantur, si voluntas Dei est, et vadant ad gloriam, quam ut vivant; ne ipsos contingat aliquando Deum offendere, et partem perdere illius summae caritatis et hereditatis aeternae.”

(I, 6, 388)

<sup>13</sup> Dove quel “bono modo”, come giustamente osserva De Luca nell'edizione del volgarizzamento, vale “per tramite lecito”; cfr. De Luca G. (a c. di), *Scrittori di religione del Trecento* 366, nota 9.

<sup>14</sup> De Luca G. (a c. di), *Scrittori di religione del Trecento* 368.

<sup>15</sup> Il rimando è a Matteo XXV, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Sulla “cattiva madre” possono vedersi: per un inquadramento storico Kapisch-Zuber C., *La mère cruelle* e per un'interpretazione psicoanalitica Bell R., *La santa anoressia* 104-5.

Non è un caso che la sequenza preceda di poco la descrizione dell'anno di vedovanza della beata, anno che rappresenta l'acquisizione d'una maggiore libertà di scelta e d'amministrazione della propria esistenza, con un'accentuazione della vita contemplativa a danno di quella attiva:

Post mortem viri in domo ipsius, eo quod liberior erat, liberalitatem suam liberalius ostendens, pauperes saepe tenebat in mensa sua et magis orationibus insistebat. In ipsa mariti domo multis visionibus et revelationibus consolatus est ipsam Deus, praecostendens sibi gloriam, quam erat in proximo adeptura. Videbat enim se vestibus candidis gloriose ornaram [sic] . . .

(I, 6, 388)

Comincia così quell'abbandono del mondo che consentirà ad Umiliana di compiere il proprio destino di mistica. A sottolineare la futura beatitudine, interviene ora il dono divino di visioni e rivelazioni, tutte riguardanti la predestinazione alla santità e alla gloria celeste. Il motivo funziona da segnalatore d'un cambiamento sostanziale: se lo stato di sposa e di madre vincola alla carne e al mondo, precludendo la via alla santità, la vedovanza costituisce la *conditio sine qua non* per intraprendere la strada di un'esistenza completamente immersa in Dio. E il lettore resta avvertito che la narrazione della santità d'Umiliana inizia soltanto ora. È forse per questo che Vito può recuperare, senza alcun imbarazzo, il *topos* del *puer senex*, spostandolo dalla tradizionale collocazione iniziale e incardinandolo fra la descrizione della pietà umiliana e quella della sua capacità di sopportazione.<sup>17</sup>

Come per san Francesco, il comportamento umiliano finora descritto appare in netto contrasto con la prassi di un codice economico/mercantile basato sull'accumulo e sul risparmio. L'autorizzazione ad eccedere rispetto alle norme di una quotidianità socialmente condivisa scaturisce dallo *status* civile di Umiliana, che, consentendole di agire sotto la responsabilità del consorte, le permette un margine, seppur limitato, di eccentricità.<sup>18</sup>

Ma con il ritorno alla casa paterna, Umiliana—"folle di Dio" deve necessariamente accedere ad una nuova condizione civile e sociale. L'*iter* narrativo è allora costretto a ripartire e lo fa con un radicale cambiamento di focalizzazione. A differenza del santo di Assisi, Umiliana — la donna Umiliana — non può spogliarsi pubblicamente, non può cioè manifestare attraverso un gesto simbolico, fortemente connotato, le proprie scelte.

L'unico strumento a cui può far ricorso è quello di rispondere alle accuse che

<sup>17</sup> "Numquam, sicut aliae puellae infra aetatem esse consueverunt, lasciviens fuit; sed infra aetatem et in aetate fuit honestatis forma, et pacis amatrix, omnes diligens, et puerilia numquam f[e]civit: erat enim non aetate, sed moribus et honestate senex" (I, 5, 387-88).

<sup>18</sup> Questo non impedisce al marito d'intervenire in modo coercitivo sugli aspetti eccessivi di un tale comportamento, ricorrendo, ove necessario, anche alle pene corporali: cfr. I, 5, 387.

le vengono mosse indicando come la normalità sia un “folle” ostacolo al percorso di conversione:

Cum minarentur ei quia non recipiebat virum, movebatur ad risum et sibi exprobrantibus subsannabat . . . : “virum habeo dignissimum, quem numquam flebo, nec sua damnatione in perpetuum viduabor.”

(I, 7, 388)

Assillata affinché acconsenta a nuove nozze, Umiliana si “fa beffe” di quanti la circondano senza essere in grado di interpretare una realtà molto più evidente e sicura dell'apparenza sensibile, e nel contempo ufficializza, a sé e agli altri, l'attuale stato coniugale: da “madre pietosa” dei miseri, degli afflitti e degli ammalati, la beata diviene moglie dell'unico e vero sposo, ricevendo l'approvazione e la conferma divina col dono della prima estasi: “In illa oratione tanta superfusa est gratia, ut quasi ebria videretur” (I, 7, 388). L'ebrietà, la pienezza, l'essere ricolma di Dio — espressioni con le quali d'ora innanzi verranno sempre designate le estasi —, rappresentano la celebrazione del “matrimonio mistico”, il congiungimento con lo sposo — Cristo.<sup>19</sup>

Dal punto di vista materiale, il nuovo statuto umiliano consegue una diminuzione dei beni temporali imposta dal mondo, a partire dal razionamento degli alimenti (“*Ab illa die statuerunt sibi et famulae suae pro mensa quatuor stia frumenti, et alia moderate*” I, 7, 388) e per culminare nella povertà assoluta, con la sottrazione della dote per azione paterna. L'evento, che rappresenta sia un risarcimento economico per la famiglia d'origine, sia una punizione per l'infrazione commessa ai danni delle norme terrene (costituendo in questo senso una discesa sostanziale nella scala sociale, puntualmente registrata da Umiliana: “*Habeat igitur me pater meus in domo sua deinceps, non ut filiam, sed ut famulam et ancillam*” I, 8, 388), coincide in realtà, secondo il consueto meccanismo di capovolgimento, con il punto più alto della sequela di Cristo: “*Cupiebat enim divinae legis amatrix per omnia sequi Christum*” (I, 8, 388). Si apre così la via alla santità.

### 3. “Noctem in diem mihi mirabiliter tribuisti”: i miracoli della luce e le tentazioni diaboliche

Il silenzio e il buio della notte circondano nella prima parte della leggenda la fattività laboriosa di Umiliana,<sup>20</sup> indicando come chi sia costretto ad agire

<sup>19</sup> Fondamentale a tal proposito il saggio di Pozzi G., *L'alfabeto delle sante*.

<sup>20</sup> “*Sed ex variis negotiis domus et frequentia familiae et discurrentia virorum et mulierum, praedicta cibaria die preparare non valens, nocturno silentio praeparabat. Pro dolor! quid dicturi sunt lascivientes in stratis, quando haec tam tenera, circa propriam salutem sollicita, sic laborando saepe magnam partem noctis ducebat insomnem?*” (I, 4, 387)



nell'oscurità per la follia del mondo — e al mondo stesso appare folle — possegga in realtà la sola, vera luce. Anzi, è lei stessa che si appresta a divenire “luce del mondo”, come si apprende a partire dal capitolo secondo:

In secundo autem anno ab hujusmodi longis visitationibus retraxit pedem, et ultra quam credi potest altius evolavit. . . . Nolebat enim Deus amplius accensam lucernam latere sub modio, et ideo posuit eam super candelabrum in altitudinem vitae et exempli, ut luceret omnibus qui in domo sunt, hoc est in Ecclesia militanti.

(II, 10—11, 389)

La similitudine procede, naturalmente, dal testo evangelico, e dimostra come la santità d'Umiliana cessi di essere elemento celato alla comunità per trasformarsi da lampada sotto il moggio in fiamma sul candelabro, vale a dire in *exemplum vitae*.<sup>21</sup>

Al valore esemplare assunto dal *modus vivendi* umiliano si collegano significativamente una serie di miracoli incentrati sul motivo della luce. La dinamica sottesa al loro svolgimento è pressoché identica: durante la notte, mentre la beata è assorta in preghiera, la lampada si spegne improvvisamente. Non volendo Umiliana destare la donna che provvede alle sue necessità quotidiane, l'intervento divino viene a sopperire l'azione umana.

Le modalità di realizzazione del miracolo stesso variano, tuttavia, da un episodio all'altro, secondo un principio di *amplificatio* che denota un crescente perfezionamento nel rapporto con la divinità.

Nel primo episodio Umiliana resta interdetta davanti al buio imprevisto, senza nessun tipo di reazione, in completa passività. Appare allora una colomba che reca stretta nel becco una rosa rossa, talmente splendente da illuminare l'intero abitacolo. La beata non ne comprende la natura soprannaturale ed inizia a rincorrere l'uccello nel desiderio di farne dono ad un suo nipotino. Ma la colomba, trasformandosi in sole, scompare nell'effigie della Madonna davanti alla quale la beata sta in orazione, rivelandosi per quello che è, figura del Paracleto, grazie all'intervento del destinatario, obbligato a deciptare il senso dell'apparizione.

La seconda volta è Umiliana a chiedere a Dio d'intervenire. Il mezzo è ancora del tutto soprannaturale: appare un angelo, o meglio, una mano angelica, che riaccende la lampada. Infine, è la beata stessa ad operare il miracolo, secondo le modalità adottate da Cristo nella narrazione evangelica: riempita la lucerna d'acqua e pronunciata una breve preghiera, l'acqua diviene olio che arde senza consumarsi.

Il processo d'identificazione con la *vita Christi* neotestamentaria viene interrotto solamente per fornire un decalogo delle virtù umiliane da consegnare

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. Matteo V, 14-15; Marco IV, 21 e Luca VIII, 16.

all'imitazione dei cristiani. Ne fanno parte: 1) l'umiltà, 2) la pazienza, 3) il digiuno, 4) il silenzio, 5) le penitenze corporali, 6) la meditazione della Passione, 7) l'adorazione dell'Eucarestia, 8) la cecità e 9) la sordità per le cose del mondo, 10) il rispetto e la venerazione per i servi di Dio.

Subito dopo, Vito introduce un altro *topos* tipico dell'agiografia, e cioè quell'invidia del demonio cui la potenza divina permette di provare la costanza dell'uomo di santa vita, come aveva tentato il Figlio di Dio durante i quaranta giorni di digiuno nel deserto. Anche Umiliana, "Quadragesimali tempore", è fatta oggetto di una serie di tentazioni diaboliche, tutte cospiranti a distoglierla dalla preghiera e dalla meditazione, costringendola a prestare attenzione, cioè ad accettare nuovamente un coinvolgimento nelle cose del mondo.<sup>22</sup>

Sono immagini delle lotte che travagliano Firenze e che tentano di richiamare la beata alla realtà con una serie di materializzazioni simulanti la situazione esterna.<sup>23</sup> Si tratta in prevalenza di corpi di morti (parenti d'Umiliana, due sue figlie, preti assassinati, il priore dei SS. Apostoli barbaramente ucciso e tutto insanguinato), culminanti nell'immagine della città in fiamme:

Alio quodam tempore, antequam Guelfi recederent de Florentia, cum occasione cujusdam discordiae partium in pluribus locis esset proelium, et ignis comburebat civitatem in aliquibus terrae partibus, et machinae projiciebant lapides fortiter in turribus constitutae; venit diabolus ad eam dicens: "Surge, Humiliana, ut videas quae fiunt. . ."

(II, 19, 391)

Il diavolo tenta d'infrangere il silenzio d'Umiliana, simbolo della reclusione da lei prescelta, con il trasferimento dell'esterno all'interno della torre/cella. In questo momento l'unico confine fra la corruzione e la santità è rappresentato dall'ostinazione della beata a tacere: parlare significherebbe guardare e dare ascolto, cadere in tentazione e restare sconfitti.

La soluzione umiliana rappresenta una sorta di compromesso: "Fratres corpus, si vis talia conspiciere, vade et vide, sed animam tecum protervus non adduces" (II, 19, 391). Non potremmo dire che la prova risulti completamente superata: riconoscendo la scissione fra anima e corpo e la possibilità di quest'ultimo di cedere alle lusinghe senza coinvolgere la prima, è come se la

<sup>22</sup> Vito stesso fa riferimento a non ben specificati tentativi di coinvolgimento della beata nelle "facende del mondo", attaccando apertamente quanti pretendono di destare la "sancta anima" acquietata "in sinu Sponsi": "Sed hanc dormientem carnales, qui sunt in Ecclesia, nonnumquam importune excitant, negotiis mundi eam implicari desiderant. . . Hi tales satis congrue non filii, sed filiae nominantur: quia dum effeminatos mores nutriunt, virili dignitate amissa, quales interius habentur exterius femineo nomine designantur" (II, 12, 389-90). Si veda a tal proposito Vauchez A., *I laici nel Medioevo* 218-19.

<sup>23</sup> Sulle tentazioni demoniache e il loro rapporto con gli avvenimenti fiorentini si sofferma Benvenuti Papi A., *Umiliana dei Cerchi* 106-8.

beata avesse autorizzato il nemico ad operare sulla realtà corporea, sottolineando l'impossibilità per lo spirito di dare spazio alle pure illusioni o alle fantasie mentali. Ed infatti il diavolo è costretto a ricorrere alle percosse e, nell'ultima delle sue apparizioni, a tentare di distogliere la beata dall'orazione mediante la presenza minacciosa d'un serpente in carne ed ossa. Si tratta, evidentemente, di una metafora di tipo sessuale, la cui introduzione è stata autorizzata proprio dalla scesa in campo del corpo e delle sue potenzialità. A confermarlo interviene anche il terrore, denunciato dalla beata, che l'animale possa salirle sulle carni, e sulle carni nude in particolare: andando a dormire, infatti,

semper pannos adolvebat pedibus, et quodam cingulo circum cingebat eos,  
ne subintraret ab pedibus serpens, et attingeret aliquatenus corpus nudum.

(II, 21, 391)

Da questa tentazione ultima Umiliana non riesce a liberarsi perseverando nel silenzio. Deve, al contrario, ricorrere alla parola, pronunciando una specie d'esorcismo:

"Praecipio tibi serpens, ut in nomine Jesu dilecti mei totus involvaris protinus sine mora hic juxta manus mea." Ad cujus verbum serpens, submisso capite, caudam et corpus advolvit capiti statim. . . . et asportans eam ad quamdam fenestram turris, imperavit ei, dicens: "Vade viam tuam, et non sis mecum amplius, quia mihi es inutilis et absque fructu." Et hoc dicto concite discessit serpens.

(II, 21, 391—92)

Trasfigurata dall'orazione, la parola umana ottiene il potere di comandare alla natura e di cacciare i demoni,<sup>24</sup> raggiungendo un ulteriore grado di perfezione nell'avvicinamento al modello del Cristo, anche lui spesso guaritore ed esorcista nella narrazione evangelica. La tappa conclusiva sarà rappresentata dall'identificazione fra corpo della creatura e corpo del creatore:

Felix Humiliana, totius perfectionis sedula imitatrix, quanto studio compatiendo sequeris Jesum dilectum tuum, quae sentire voluisti ea, quae ipse in suo immaculato corpore pro nostra salute sentivit.

(III, 27, 393)

Questa immedesimazione — o meglio, incorporamento in Cristo — caratterizzerà l'ultima fase della *Vita* di Umiliana, che — rimossi tutti i modelli agiografici precedenti (il martirio, l'eremitaggio, la clausura in monastero) —

<sup>24</sup> "Non est mirandum, reverenda Humiliana, si verbo daemones expellebas, et ferae pessimae mansuescerent ad verbum tuum, et obedirent tibi, quae orationis dulcedine Dominum omnium usque ad peccatores saepius inclinasti, multis vivens frequenter multa beneficia contulisti" (III, 22, 392).



sarà sempre più incentrata sul fenomeno delle estasi e dei rapimenti mistici, realizzazione del vero e proprio congiungimento con l'amato.

#### 4. "Statim fuit in mentis excessus": la mistica e il corpo

La mistica umiliana non rappresenta tuttavia una vera e propria trasformazione del modello di santità precedentemente descritto, tanto è vero che anche nei primi tre capitoli si accenna frequentemente alla condizione estatica, condizione che la beata riesce spesso a contagiare a quanti la venerano come guida e come maestra.<sup>25</sup> Nelle diverse fasi della *Vita*, infatti, la condotta umiliana — la scelta di valori effettuata dalla beata al momento della reclusione — non viene affatto dismessa, quanto piuttosto traslata ad un livello superiore.

Questa visione particolare dell'esperienza mistica contagia anche il sistema simbolico di cui Vito da Cortona fa uso, sistema che permane intatto, quanto a scelte linguistiche e metaforiche, anche nell'ultima parte della biografia. Tornano così, con le solite modalità espressive e figurative, i miracoli della luce. Ma ora, ad Umiliana assorta in preghiera e gettata nel buio dallo spegnersi del lume, appaiono "Tres sphaerae supra solis candorem fulgentes, qui totam cellam longe magis quam sol iste materialis, quem videmus corporeis oculis, illustrarunt" (V, 47, 398). Le tre sfere si fondono in una e scompaiono nel momento in cui la beata tenta di abbracciarle, di confonderle, cioè, in una realtà corporea.

L'evento miracoloso è qui divenuto rivelazione della divinità, dell'entità superiore: Umiliana assiste alla manifestazione del mistero trinitario, supremo dogma della fede cristiana. Il sistema figurativo è rimasto in sé sostanzialmente intatto: la luce è sineddoche/metonimia di Dio e, quindi, Dio stesso. Ma il grado di rappresentazione e la capacità interpretativa del traslato sono nettamente superiori.

Ciò vale anche per l'ultima serie di miracoli collegati alla luce che precedono la sequenza finale della morte e dei miracoli *post obitum*. Questa volta è una luce anomala ad irrompere nella cella ("insolito fulgore"), cosicché Umiliana, volgendo lo sguardo "versus tabulam, in qua erat imago Dominae nostrae, vidit quamdam ignis copiosam flammam in panno" (V, 51, 398). Tentando inutilmente di soffocare le fiamme con le mani, la beata si accorge di non contrarre alcuna bruciatura e comprende così di non trovarsi di fronte ad un fuoco materiale. Tocca al biografo decifrare il segno per il lettore incapace, con una sovrabbondanza esplicativa che traduce il simbolo in metafora:

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<sup>25</sup> Cfr., ad esempio, la richiesta di fra Michele: III, 24, 392.

Credendum est quod ignis iste sancti Spiritus ignem ostenderet, quo ipsam Christus, meritis gloriosae Matris, cui multum ipsa serviebat, maxime inflammarat.

(V, 51, 399)

Il procedimento è chiaro: se la luce è Dio e Umiliana è “infiammata” da Dio, è lei stessa ad ardere, identificata nell’immagine della Vergine, madre e sposa del Cristo.<sup>26</sup>

Apparentemente l’immersione/assorbimento nella divinità dovrebbe coincidere con il raggiungimento del punto di massima lontananza dal mondo e dalla carne, ivi compreso il proprio corpo, fonte di fastidio e di disgusto. Ed in effetti, questa componente permea di sé alcuni punti della biografia umiliana, manifestandosi soprattutto nel disprezzo per la materialità della vita e nella mortificazione della carne attraverso il dolore. Vito accenna, ad esempio, all’asprezza del digiuno a cui Umiliana si sottopone, asprezza che costringe fra Michele a limitarne l’eccesso e a regolarne le modalità.<sup>27</sup> L’impossibilità di accondiscendere alle richieste del confessore deriva dall’attrito — per la beata profondamente doloroso — esistente fra i cibi del corpo e il cibo dell’anima:

O Deus, amor desiderate, quando me liberabis de corpore mortis hujus, et de cibis corporalibus istis, ut in mensa tua cibus ad votum meum epuler Beatorum.

(III, 28, 393)

Il grido/invocazione d’Umiliana denuncia nell’alimentazione la perpetuazione della carne e, dunque, della corruzione e della morte; nell’assunzione dei cibi corporali una recessione lungo quel percorso verso la mensa celeste, iniziato tempo addietro, con le donne di santa vita che la circondavano:

Mane sabbati Panem ipsum sanctissimum realiter et sacramentaliter gustatura (sumebat enim omni mane diei sabbati Corporis Christi sacramentum) surgebat ipsa die valde tempestive apud argumentosa silenter: et ne illi de domo perperderet, quia nolebat esse alicui onerosa, immutabat sibi nomen, et rogabat socias ut non proprio nomine, sed ipso imposito nomine vocaretur.

(III, 32, 394)

<sup>26</sup> Il passaggio finale consisterà nel contagiare di sé il luogo, manifestando agli altri la propria luce, il proprio splendore in Dio: “Saepe sua cella visa est de nocte ab Gisla famula sua, velut solis lumine splendere. Nam et quadam nocte famula sua Gisla, cum excitaretur ad dulcia suspiria et affectuosas locutiones ipsius, dicentis “Jesu, amor mi dilectissime”, vidit cellam suam tantis irradiatam fulgoribus, quod velut meridies videretur” (V, 51, 399).

<sup>27</sup> “Incepit multum jejuna in pane et aqua, et facere magnam abinentiam: sed illam viam sibi tenere frater Michaël confessor suus non permisit” (III, 28, 392).

Il cambio di nome è, naturalmente, una forma di rifiuto dell'identità mondana, una sorta di ingresso nella vita religiosa, che rimuove il ricordo e il legame con la vita del peccato. Ma è anche una forma di allontanamento dal corpo e dall'esperienza che a quel nome sono legati. Il distacco definitivo si realizza con la dedizione e l'abbandono totale della propria materialità e spiritualità in Dio. È un'esperienza inizialmente dolorosa, che si innesca sulla meditazione di un'altra corporeità, l'umanità divina offesa dal peccato, la Passione di Cristo:

nocturno silentio, dormiente famula et illis de domo, fortibus clamoribus et duris lamentationibus deplorabat dilecti sui Jesu passionem crinibus resolutis.

(III, 31, 394)

Le lacrime che scorrono copiose "ex memoria passionis Christi" (IV, 34, 395) e che rappresentano un dono, una grazia divina,<sup>28</sup> sono l'elemento visibile, l'etichetta esteriore dell'avvenuta unione con Dio attraverso il dolore. Ma è un dolore che ha natura esclusivamente spirituale, che subentra, sostituendola, ad ogni realtà fisica, che concede una forza sovrumana e che provoca uno stato di rapimento in Dio tale da non venir scalfito né dalle molestie dei familiari, né dai richiami di fra Michele, né dalla sofferenza della malattia.<sup>29</sup>

Da questa esperienza, che è chiaramente un'esperienza di iniziazione, di penetrazione nei misteri della divinità, Umiliana consegue due doni: una marchiatura, segno di appartenenza al regno divino (il suo corpo infatti profuma e quell'odore è avvertito anche da molte venerabili donne: IV, 42, 396); un potere sulla carne che le permette di risanare i corpi e di richiamarli alla vita. Da questo punto di vista diviene eloquente, più che la resurrezione della figlia Rigale (IV, 43, 396), la guarigione di un fanciullo malato, significativamente conclusa dall'apparizione di Gesù.<sup>30</sup>

"O carissime fili, num memor es Creatoris tui, recogitans quantam pro te sustinuit passionem? (V, 44, 397), chiede la beata al malato, rivelando come la colpa del fanciullo consista proprio nella sua incapacità a sostenere il dolore, o meglio, a superarlo nel pensiero della sofferenza universale del Cristo. A lui non riesce, cioè, quello che Umiliana pratica abitualmente: il distacco dal corpo per assumere un altro corpo, spirituale ed immaginativo, forma dell'umanità di Dio. Per compiere il miracolo, allora, la beata non fa altro che imitare la passione di Gesù, prendendo su di sé, in due tempi,<sup>31</sup> la malattia del ragazzo e ricorrendo a

<sup>28</sup> Si ricordi che in altro luogo della *Vita* la beata, privata del dono delle lacrime, si mette della calcina negli occhi, affinché Dio, impietosito, le conceda la grazia del pianto: cfr. II, 13, 390.

<sup>29</sup> Cfr. rispettivamente i seguenti passi: III, 31, 394; IV, 34, 394 e V, 52, 399; IV, 34, 395; V, 55, 399.

<sup>30</sup> Per l'intero episodio, cfr. V, 44-46, 397-98.

<sup>31</sup> Significativamente, fra le due visite al ragazzo sofferente, si pone un passaggio in cui Umiliana,



un modulo espressivo tipicamente evangelico: “Fiat, inquit, mihi sicut dixisti” (V, 44, 397); “Fiat juxta verbum tuum” (V, 45, 397).<sup>32</sup>

L'apparizione di Cristo fanciullo, che assume su di sé la sofferenza di Umiliana,<sup>33</sup> e che realizza, in un certo senso, una metafora del mistero della redenzione, sembra preludere al successivo rapporto dolore fisico/estasi, motivo che percorre l'intera narrazione dell'agonia della beata. Si tratta di uno scambio fra corpo e corpo: la malattia, in tutto il suo tragico realismo fatto di sangue e contorcimenti, viene deposta nel seno divino (cfr. V, 52, 399). Ogni sensazione dolorifica e ogni necessità fisica sono allora rimosse, come già simbolicamente aveva dimostrato la pratica del digiuno e l'assunzione del cibo celeste,<sup>34</sup> quel pane divino che, ricevuto in dono da un'apparizione angelica, oltre a sfamare Umiliana per una settimana, diviene eloquentemente strumento di altro:

De pane illo habuit Domina Rigalis soror sua, et Domina Luciana matertera sua, et Fr. Vigor Cortonensis de Ordine Minorum: quem cum dedit eis dixit eis: “Accipite panem hunc Angelorum, quem Deus noster cuidam suae famulae misit”.

(III, 29, 393)

È una sorta di rito eucaristico che, coinvolgendo il gruppo di adepti stretti attorno alla santa,<sup>35</sup> lo trasforma esso stesso in corpo/comunità, ma sancisce anche il massimo grado di lontananza dalla realtà terrena, discepoli compresi. Le parole della beata divengono ora incomprensibili ed esclusive, decodificabili solamente da chi condivide un medesimo grado di perfezione:

exclamante . . . nihil de omnibus sentiebat . . . quandoque in quodam jubilo dulciter canentem audierunt, tam subtiliter et tacite, quod audiri non poterat nisi apponeretur juxta os suum auris: vocem quidem jubilationis audiebant, sed discerni non poterat quid proferret in cantu.

(IV, 34, 395)

Il rapimento stesso diviene simbolo dell'elevazione spirituale di Umiliana,

per trovare sollievo alla parte di malattia che si è assunta, prova a riscaldarsi accendendo un fuoco: ma cade tra le fiamme, rimanendo ovviamente del tutto incolume (V, 45, 397).

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. Luca I, 38.

<sup>33</sup> “Disparuit puer Jesus, reliquens eam sanam” (V, 46, 397).

<sup>34</sup> Sul valore centrale che nella santità femminile riveste il rifiuto del cibo e l'assunzione esclusiva dell'Eucarestia, cfr. Walker Bynum C., *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* 69 e *Fragmentation and Redemption* 27-48 e 119-50.

<sup>35</sup> Nella *Vita*, insieme ad Umiliana, si muovono molte figure di uomini e di donne. Soprattutto quest'ultime costituiscono un *leit-motiv* che percorre l'intera leggenda, dalla conversione ai miracoli e alle testimonianze. Alcune di esse sono costantemente presenti accanto alla beata, come, ad esempio, la cognata Ravenna o le “famulae” Gisla e Piccilia. Del nucleo di penitenza che si stringeva attorno ad Umiliana parla Benvenuti Papi A., *Umiliana dei Cerchi* 113-16.

essendo materialmente, di fatto un sollevamento dal suolo per entrare in Dio (Cfr. IV, 42, 396).

## 5. I “termini” della leggenda

Umiliana pratica la vita attiva e quella contemplativa, si espone agli attacchi del nemico uscendone vittoriosa, opera miracoli e guarigioni secondo una tipologia di eventi stabilita, all'interno della quale si potrebbe far rientrare, con minimi aggiustamenti, anche lo svolgimento di molti altri testi agiografici, redatti o volgarizzati fra XIII e XIV secolo.<sup>36</sup> Questo vale anche per l'ostentata reticenza del biografo che, inaugurata nell'*incipit* —

Et quia longum est omnia scribere de vita sua et gestis, velut lector florum in prato positus, pauca de multis ad honorem Dei et utilitatem nostram et aedificationem audientium colligemus, . . . quantas eleemosynas . . . distribuerit . . . dicere non possemus. O quis dicere valeat. . . Et quis enumerabit, quae in quinque annis egerit. . . Taceamus, eo quod dicere longum esset.

(I,2,387)

—, prosegue in tutto il *corpus* della leggenda, fino a coinvolgere l'elenco delle tentazioni, delle grazie e, persino, delle virtù.<sup>37</sup> La procedura diventa anzi un gioco di specchi, all'inizio del quale si pone la reticenza della beata stessa, propagantesi al confessore, ai testimoni,<sup>38</sup> ed infine al biografo, lungo una catena che deve trovare nel testo scritto il giusto compromesso fra la necessità della comunicazione esemplare e la preservazione dei misteri divini.

Eppure, leggendo la *Vita* d'Umiliana non si riesce a liberarsi dall'impressione che il ricorso, così diffuso ed insistito, al *topos* della reticenza sia qualcosa di più dell'adozione di un tradizionale motivo agiografico. Serva, cioè, quasi come *excusatio* per una mancanza, un disfunzionamento collocabile ben più in profondità rispetto alla struttura linguistica di superficie.

Il racconto di Vito da Cortona procede in effetti in modo meno lineare di quanto non ci si aspetterebbe dall'adozione pacifica di un modello lungamente testato nel corso della storia, a partire almeno dal IV—V secolo. Tra gli elementi che rischiavano di scardinare gli ingranaggi ben oleati del vecchio meccanismo c'era, innanzi tutto, il fatto di essere adattato a celebrare una santità femminile e, per di più, una santità esperita nel mondo. Proprio da questo dato di fatto nascono l'urgenza di giustificare il tipo prescelto e la necessità di difenderlo dall'accusa di rappresentare un grado inferiore di perfezione. Così, Umiliana non

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. Picone M., *Introduzione a Il racconto*, a c. di Picone, 11-23 e 197-211.

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. rispettivamente: II, 16, 390; III, 24, 392; III, 26, 393.

<sup>38</sup> Il rimando è nell'ordine a V, 46, 397-98; V, 51, 399 e VI, 59, 400.

è soltanto un “*vas Domino electum*” sul quale porre le basi della Gerusalemme celeste, ma una vera e propria fondatrice alla stregua di san Francesco:

Dum divina sapientia domum sibi aedificans, in qua excidit columnas septem, mitteret ancillas suas, id est varios Ordinum Fundatores, ut vocarent ad arcem . . . , misit et hanc nonae vitae ac sanctae conversationis mirabilem Fundatricem.

(II, 11, 389)

Chiara esempio concesso dalla grazia divina ad edificazione dei “secolari”, Umiliana è *miles Christi*, non meno dei santi che l’hanno preceduta o degli uomini e donne di “santa conversazione” allora viventi:

Quid sibi de vita monastica defuit, quae in tam continuis silentiis et observationibus vixit? Quid minus sanctis Eremitis habuit, quae in meditullio illae civitatis sibi solitudinem invenit, et thalamum in carcerem commutavit? Quid minus sanctis Sororibus S. Damiani asperitatis sustinuit, quae in cibis et potibus tam sobrie vixit? . . . Alii relicto seculo et paternis mansionibus, ad solitudinem fugientes, Domino militarunt; haec in domum patris solitudinem adducens, militando nobiliter vicit mundum, et vitium in medio mundanorum.

(II, 11, 389)

La linearità stessa dell’esposizione narrativa risente di quest’ansia giustificatoria, finendo con l’assumere un andamento che, ad onta di ogni precisione cronologica, appare piuttosto disordinato e confuso. Così, il catalogo delle virtù, dei silenzi, delle umiliazioni e delle pratiche ascetiche si mescola ai frequenti rapimenti mistici; le estasi si frappongono ai miracoli, alle malattie, alle guarigioni e alle molestie dei parenti, per terminare con l’affastellamento indiscriminato dei doni e delle rivelazioni.<sup>39</sup>

A tal punto è spinto il procedimento dell’*accumulatio* che, giunto alle apparizioni *post obitum*, il biografo è costretto a rimandare il lettore ad un passo precedente della *Vita*, barricandosi dietro il consueto *topos* della reticenza:

Multos alios ab ejusmodi turbationis liberans pristinae et majori gratiae restauravit, de quibus nimis esset longum dicere: propterea de ipsa et de

<sup>39</sup> Vito attribuisce più volte e in vari luoghi alla memoria della Passione di Cristo il pianto e la sofferenza della beata: cfr., ad esempio, III, 31, 394 e IV, 34, 395. Due volte fa cenno alla punizione divina che colpisce il padre di Umiliana, colpevole d’averla danneggiata: quando descrive lo spirito di profezia (IV, 38, 396) e quando parla delle estasi (IV, 37, 395). Lo stesso succede al motivo delle molestie causate dai fratelli che, dopo essere state descritte in vita (IV, 34, 394), tornano anche in morte della beata (V, 52, 399).



miraculis quae gratia supplicationis suae operari dignatus est Deus, tacenter dimitto, vide solum columnam 28 et quae infra ponuntur.

(VI, 58, 400)

Ma reticenza e *accumulatio* rappresentano anche l'inadeguatezza del linguaggio umano ad esprimere la grandezza dei doni e la completezza del cammino in Dio, secondo un modello che Vito da Cortona poteva facilmente rinvenire proprio all'interno della stessa letteratura francescana.<sup>40</sup>

Contemporanea alla stesura della *Vita secunda* di Tommaso da Celano, la biografia di Vito — che, lo ricordiamo, era stato uno dei frati “vestiti” da san Francesco — non poteva non richiamarsi alla forma originaria della agiografia francescana, incline alla mitizzazione dell'eroe eponimo.<sup>41</sup>

*Speculum perfectionis, salutis et virtutum*, Francesco era l'*alter Christus*, immagine della totale conformità col Figlio di Dio, come aveva sottolineato lo sconvolgente dono delle stimmate e come avrebbe proclamato di lì a poco, in maniera definitiva, la *Legenda maior* di San Bonaventura.

Proprio le stimmate avevano sancito il legame del santo col corpo/umanità di Cristo, indicando con forza la centralità della Passione, cioè della sofferenza, nel piano salvifico divino: Dio s'era umiliato nella materialità dell'incarnazione e nella “morte di croce” per amore degli uomini. Non si trattava dunque d'insistere soltanto sull'imitazione profonda e radicale della vita terrena del Dio-uomo, ma anche e soprattutto di proporre il recupero della componente caritativa: “La figura monastica, per sopravvivere, deve assumere un'altra dimensione: non più il monaco che fugge il mondo, e neppure il monaco che convertendo il mondo lo occupa, bensì il monaco che ama il mondo. Francesco d'Assisi impersona questa nuova dimensione”.<sup>42</sup>

Scardinata la dedizione totale alla separatezza della vita comunitaria, il francescano ritrovava l'occasionale contatto con l'umanità per praticare l'amore attraverso la predicazione e l'attività di conversione del prossimo, secondo una condotta che alternava eremo e città, notte e giorno, vita contemplativa e vita attiva.<sup>43</sup>

A Vito non sfugge certamente il valore rivoluzionario di una tale innovazione. E se insite sulla grande povertà, umiltà e sopportazione — cardini tipicamente francescani dell'*imitatio Christi* — praticati da Umiliana, si preoccupa anche di ascrivere alla beata una prassi comportamentale attenta alla

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. Bologna C., *L'ordine francescano e la letteratura dell'Italia pretridentina*.

<sup>41</sup> Vastissima la bibliografia relativa alla figura e alla leggenda di San Francesco. Rimandiamo soltanto a: Da Campagnola S., *L'angelo del sesto sigillo e l'“alter Christus” e Francesco d'Assisi nei suoi scritti e nelle sue biografie*; Manselli R., *San Francesco*; Miccoli G., *La proposta cristiana di Francesco d'Assisi e Francesco d'Assisi*. Utili precisazioni in Guglielminetti M., *Biografia ed autobiografia* 829-35.

<sup>42</sup> Leonardi C., *Dalla santità “monastica” alla santità “politica”* 92.

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. Delcorno C., *Introduzione* 16.

diffusione della dottrina cristiana.

Ciò non comportava evidentemente un problema durante la fase “mondana” della vita umiliana, quando il magistero della beata s’era esplicato in stretto contatto con gli insegnamenti e gli strumenti dell’ortodossia, attraverso la proposta del proprio *modus vivendi*:

Alios hortabatur ad pacem, alios ad patientiam: aliis proponebat vitam Sanctorum, et admonebat ad eam quam prae oculis suis sine intermissione portabat: alios vero ad vitam solitariam monebat, dicens: “Domum reputa solitudinem nemoris, et familiam silvestres feras, et inter eas eris velut in nemore, servando silentium et continuis orationibus insistendo.” Consulabat humilis Humiliana, humilitatis exemplum, ut quisquis vellet ad alta conscendere, in humilitate poneret fundamentum.

(III, 25, 392)

Ma era la possibilità stessa della predicazione a venire meno, una volta accolto nella sua pienezza lo stato mistico: uscendo da sé e allontanandosi dalla carne che tutti vincola, uomini e donne, alla “morte seconda”, Umiliana si trovava costretta ad abbandonare la parola, per ricorrere ad un linguaggio corporeo fatto di atteggiamenti, posture, prossemiche, spesso del tutto involontari. Ed è qui che il biografo trova la soluzione:

Quid de praedicatione, qua magis opere praedicavit quam verbo, et corpore mortua praedicare non cessat, et in perpetuum praedicabit? Si domum patris et vestes viduales non dimisit, non per ipsam stetit: quoniam cuncta quae sub caelo sunt liberali mente desuerit. Sed Deus non permisit: voluit enim exemplo ejus seculi otiosos trahere.

(II, 13, 390)

Ancora una volta ciò che viene evidenziato è l’incompatibilità fra senso comune e logica divina, tragicamente messi a confronto nella carne svuotata della mistica “in excessus mentis”. Il corpo diviene così “per la donna illetterata e sprovvista di potere, un mezzo di comunicazione privilegiato. Dissolto, sollevato dal suolo, estasiato, liquefatto, irradiante”, esso “è già di per sé un linguaggio che ciascuno decrypta secondo le proprie risorse” (Vauchez A., *I laici nel Medioevo* 221). E se lo stato mistico è annientamento della carne abbandonata sulla terra, la visione dell’estasi, della fuga e del trascendimento dell’umanità diviene, al contrario, esempio e ammonimento per chi guarda: ultima negazione del corpo, l’estasi ne è anche la più compiuta sublimazione, in un ossimoro vivente.<sup>44</sup>

Ma l’intuizione di Vito non si ferma qui. Se è il corpo che si fa

<sup>44</sup> L’ossimoro è figura ricorrente anche del linguaggio mistico. A tal proposito, interessanti spunti possono vedersi in Gigliucci R., *Oximoron amoris* 115-21.

predicazione, che diviene parola attraverso la gravidanza del linguaggio iconografico, allora uscendo da sé per congiungersi a Dio, la mistica completa anche la propria esemplarità, lasciando agli occhi degli astanti — e, nel corso del tempo, all'avveduto lettore della leggenda — l'icona della propria fisicità. È così che la descrizione della vita mistica assolve, suo malgrado, il ruolo didattico che l'agiografia riveste per il destinatario ultimo e, cioè, per coloro che — preclusa qualsiasi comunanza di codice con l'emittente — resterebbero indissolubilmente legati alla realtà mortale. Questo è il modello che la vita di Umiliana, forse per prima, è chiamata ad essere.

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## Re-Reading a Mis-known and Mis-read Mystic: Angela da Foligno

Angela of Foligno, a name almost unknown nowadays, was such an influential mystical figure in the thirteenth century that she had many disciples and followers, among whom Ubertino da Casale. Because of her popularity, she was acclaimed a blessed by popular consent immediately after her death.<sup>1</sup> Angela's favor among Christian believers survived her death, mainly because of her writings, which in the codex of Assisi bear the following title: *Liber sororis Lellae de fulgineo de tertio ordinis sancti francisci*. Yet, since the *Liber* was written by different scribes, can we still consider it as Angela's?

Here I shall seek to disentangle the different voices in the text in order to make Angela's voice heard. Before we can possibly hear her authentic voice, however, it is necessary to remove ourselves from that form of criticism that has sometimes manipulated and obscured the text. Since Angela has but scantily engaged the interest of scholars of medieval literature, I shall first ponder the reasons she has been elided from the canon of Italian literature and offer an overview of the many codices, editions, different titles, and the divisions of the text. I shall concentrate only on the *Liber*, generally called *Memoriale*,<sup>2</sup> since it is here that Angela's voice can most effectively be retraced. In fact, the *Liber* seems to have been recorded by the same friar, *Frater A.*, with the exception of a brief interruption, and apparently in Angela's presence. Secondly, I shall focus on Angela's life. Although the *Memoriale* offers but scant biographical information, scholars have tried time and again to specify years, months, and days for many events in her life, in their attempts to give a structured form to a shapeless life account. The textual evidence is that her life as well as her

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<sup>1</sup> Yet, she was recognized as blessed by the Church only in 1701 and never proclaimed saint.

<sup>2</sup> Although I would have liked to maintain the indeterminacy of Angela's writings, the use of the title *Memoriale* — which is only a conjecture — has been prompted by practical reasons.

writings resist any systematizing. Thirdly, in order to place Angela within a wider context, I shall briefly explore the rise of women mystics in the Middle Ages. These women occupied a position intermediate between the official Church and lay Christians. Since they were the first women who sought to make their voices heard, they have also drawn the attention of feminist criticism, which has offered different views: mysticism is sometimes considered a form of subjugation of women, while at times it is viewed as a way towards acquiring a voice in a male society. Finally, I shall employ feminist theories in order to show the ways in which Angela succeeds in creating a place that enables her to speak. The fundamental question to be asked, therefore, is to which extent we can hear Angela's voice. Only through a recovery of her voice can we in fact hope that her work will draw not only the interest of theologians but will also be included in anthologies of Italian Literature, as is the case for so many mystics in the Anglo-Saxon world.

## 1. Angela's Words: Tradition and Manipulation

### 1.1. Angela's Fortune and Neglect

One of the greatest Italian medieval mystics, according to Pozzi and Leonardi (*Scrittrici mistiche italiane*), Angela of Foligno contributed greatly to the development of Western mysticism because of her influence on later mystics. As Evelyn Underhill puts it in *The Essentials of Mysticism*: "excepting only St. Bonaventura, this woman has probably exerted a more enduring, more far-reaching influence than any other Franciscan of the century which followed the Founder's death" (160). According to most recent editors, her spiritual instructions have been acknowledged and quoted by St. Francis of Sales, Bossuet, Fénelon, S. Alfonso de' Liguori and Pope Benedict XIV (Thier and Calufetti 103).

Angela was part of her epoch's religious revival that had Umbria as its focal center. And yet, her name rarely appears in histories of Italian literature or anthologies together with that of St. Francis or Iacopone of Todi, with whom she shared many characteristics. Few are the exceptions: Elio Gioanola's *La letteratura italiana*, unlike other well-known literary histories such as that by Salinari and Ricci or Mario Sansone, mentions Angela da Foligno's work. And yet, although Gioanola defines her "il più grande spirito mistico dell'epoca" (113), her *Liber sororis Lellae de fulgineo* is cited very cursorily in parentheses. Furthermore, Angela's book is mentioned after Ubertino da Casale's *Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu* without making any reference to the historical fact that it was Angela who influenced Ubertino.

Obviously, a part of the religious production of the Middle Ages has been appropriated by Italian literature. Salinari and Ricci, for instance, dedicate a whole chapter in the first volume of their *Storia della letteratura italiana* to "La

letteratura religiosa," starting with the following statement:

Il sentimento religioso ha un ruolo fondamentale nella società medievale e ne caratterizza tutta la visione della vita, i modi di comportamento, le forme di espressione, dalla riflessione filosofica alla ricerca storica e scientifica, dalla produzione letteraria alle arti figurative.

(1: 210)

Although the two scholars recognize the importance and influence of religious literature, they only examine the works by St. Francis and Iacopone of Todi.

In *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* Giovanni Pozzi laments that only religious writings in the Tuscan vernacular have been accepted into the literary canon in order to analyze and document the development of Italian language and literature. In his Introduction to the volume, the Franciscan scholar expresses such a view in a convincing and seemingly resentful manner:

In Italia, la storia letteraria ha fatto pienamente sua la produzione religiosa volgare del due e trecento; ma ha trascurato il resto, con un crescendo man mano che si giunge alle ultime età. L'ha assunta non in ragione del contenuto, ma della lingua, intesa questa non come forma distinta di un pensiero particolarissimo, bensì come tesoro lessicale ed esemplarità grammaticale della lingua toscana antica.

(25)

The full acceptance of Catherine of Siena in Italian literary histories further corroborates Pozzi's view,<sup>3</sup> for the Sienese writer occupies a place in the literary canon because she wrote in the Tuscan vernacular.<sup>4</sup>

Pozzi's further attempt to explain the absence of mystical writers in the histories of Italian literature is more questionable and less convincing. He suggests that Italian mysticism does not reach the high level of poetry of other European countries. He also goes on stating that Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena cannot be compared to Mathilde of Magdeburgh or Theresa of Avila: "Ad Angela da Foligno, per quanto di suo è filtrato nella trascrizione di Fra' Arnaldo, a Caterina da Siena si riconosce un vigore di lingua indiscutibile, . . . ma nessuna primeggia come nelle rispettive aree Matilde di Magdeburgo o

<sup>3</sup> Another explanation could come from the suggestion offered by de Beauvoir, who maintains that Catherine of Siena "belongs to the rather masculine type" because of her theological considerations (*The Second Sex* 674n1). Nowadays, however, de Beauvoir's distinction of two types of feminine mysticism is considered outdated by contemporary feminists.

<sup>4</sup> Speaking of religious writers of the Duecento, Salinari and Ricci mention no woman writer. For the Trecento, they discuss only Catherine of Siena. By contrast, the volume edited by Pozzi, *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, lists, for the Duecento and Trecento, Chiara d'Assisi, Beatrice d'Este, Umiliana Cerchi, Umiltà da Faenza, Margherita da Cortona, Vanna da Orvieto, Chiara da Montefalco, Villana de' Botti, etc.



Teresa d'Avila" (26-27).<sup>5</sup>

However objectionable, Pozzi's views are insightful. And yet, one cannot but lament that Angela's work has remained confined to the field of theological studies and has hardly been acknowledged by literary critics primarily because it is written in Latin rather than in the vernacular. Is this exclusion attributable to her work's questionable literary style? Or can we rather suggest that she has been neglected because we have not yet heard her real voice?

Although the reason for her exclusion from the literary canon is hardly evident, Angela's neglect by literary critics may also reside in the fact that most editions of her work are issued by publishing houses affiliated with religious orders, whose primary concern is spiritual edification. In fact, the latest critical edition, *Il libro della beata Angela da Foligno*, was edited by two Franciscans, Ludger Thier and Abele Calufetti, and was published by the Collegium S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas. In 1992, however, Giovanni Pozzi, an eminent professor of Italian literature and a Franciscan, published *Il Libro dell'esperienza*, containing extracts from Angela's works. By choosing the publishing house Adelphi, Pozzi showed his intention to make the book available to a wider audience.

Angela's writings have been more successful in France, where mystical works became known, unlike in Italy, outside the ecclesiastical domain and were soon absorbed by the world of letters. The fortune of Angela's writings started with the edition by Hello in 1868. *Le Livre des visions* was acclaimed for its poetic style by Luigi Veuillot: "l'admirable machine poétique du Dante n'a rien qui égale la stature ni la structure de ce poème" (*Idées d'un protestant sur Angèle de Foligno*; qtd. Pozzi, *Il libro dell'esperienza*, "Introduzione" 12). Veuillot, by comparing Angela to Dante, stands out in contrast to the recent criticism of Pozzi, who, as mentioned above, puts Angela's work at a lower level than Teresa's highly poetic production. It is obvious, therefore, that Angela's writings have caused a more positive reaction in France than in Italy, not only in religious circles, but also among lay readers and literary critics. For instance, Angela is the inspirator of *L'Expérience intérieure* and *Le Coupable* by Georges Bataille, who discovered Angela's work through Hello's version.<sup>6</sup> The edition by Hello was followed by those by Doncoeur and Ferré, published in France respectively in 1926 and 1927.

### 1.2. Codices, Editions, and Titles

To the overall neglect undergone by Angela's writings must also be added the unreliability of their editions. It is interesting to note that every new edition

<sup>5</sup> Italian scholars often establish models, to which all the other writers are compared and valued. Recent critical theories seek to subvert these mostly arbitrary literary hierarchies.

<sup>6</sup> We shall see later how Angela has attracted also the attention of feminist critics: de Beauvoir in France and Karma Lochrie in the United States.

dismisses the previous one as inaccurate. In "L'édition critique du livre de sainte Angèle de Foligno," Doncoeur states: "J'ai dit ailleurs que la traduction du Livre d'Angèle par E. Hello, ne pouvait mériter aucune confiance" (289). Furthermore, in his article in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, he maintains that Hello's version is based on an unreliable work from the sixteenth century. By contrast, Doncoeur maintains that Angela's work "n'a été connue dans sa pureté qu'en 1926 par l'édition latine et la traduction française publiée à Paris" (571); namely, Doncoeur's edition. Yet, as we shall see, Doncoeur's word is not the last one on this subject.

Also in Italy the controversy persists. In their 1985 critical edition, *Il libro della beata Angela da Foligno*, Thier and Calufetti attack Doncoeur's version: "L'edizione di Doncoeur, che si basa sul manoscritto A [Assisi] e alcuni codici B, non merita alcuna fiducia." They continue their critique of previous editions: "L'edizione di Faloci Pulignani, condotta sul ms. S [Subiaco], è piena di sbagli di lettura. L'edizione di Ferré, eseguita sul ms. A, è la meno errata; gli sbagli, quanto alla lettura del ms., si riducono ad uno o due per pagina stampata" (115).

Apparently it is common for editors of manuscripts to discredit previous editions. Yet, this endless polemic makes the reader doubt whether any edition will be outdated in a few years by a supposedly more accurate work. As far as Angela's writings are concerned, the controversy about the chronology of their numerous manuscripts still continues. Let us then trace the history of these manuscripts in order to understand how Angela's work has circulated and reached us.

Until recently only five manuscripts were considered relevant. The manuscripts listed by Doncoeur are found respectively in Assisi, Subiaco, Bologna and Bruxelles, Paris, and Pérouse. Doncoeur suggests that new manuscripts may be found and his prediction has come true. The introduction to the Thier and Calufetti edition lists seven families of manuscripts: seventeen manuscripts in Latin, eight in the Italian vernacular, and three in Catalan. Besides being apparently very accurate, Thier and Calufetti's presentation is more comprehensive than any previous one. Furthermore, they introduce the idea of two *redazioni* written by the same person, which the two scholars seek to restore, as their "Notice to the Reader" states: "Where the first (B) and the second (AIRS) redactions agree with one another, the critical text is printed in block letters. What pertains exclusively to the second redaction is printed in cursive letters" (122).<sup>7</sup> Until the publication of the Thier and Calufetti's 1985 edition, Angela's writings had been based on the group of manuscripts of the second

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<sup>7</sup> The *redazione* B contains five codices, which Thier and Calufetti assign to the "Prima famiglia" (51-55). The codices A (Assisi), I (Biblioteca S. Isidoro), R (Rieti), and S (Subiaco) are listed under the "Seconda famiglia" (55-63). The Veronese translation (M) that faces the Latin text of the first and second *redazione* is listed under the second family of codices, and its codex goes back to the end of the fourteenth or the beginning of the fifteenth centuries.

*redazione*, among which are those in Assisi (A), Subiaco (S), and Milan (M), which is written in a Veronese dialect.<sup>8</sup>

The diffusion of the manuscripts throughout Europe witnesses the success of Angela's writings: she was widely read and translated, as also the numerous editions and translations attest (Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, German, English, and Flemish). The first *incunabulum* was an Italian version printed in Vicenza in 1497, followed by a Latin text published in Spain (Alcalà) in 1502. The first Spanish edition was published in 1510. The French, the German and the Flemish editions came out in the seventeenth century, in 1604, 1617, and 1628 respectively. The English edition appeared in 1871. Thier and Calufetti maintain that most of these editions are based on the Latin manuscripts of the third family. They have also stated that the third family had been somewhat corrupted by the editor's manipulation of the text. We thus have to conclude that these editions cannot be trusted.<sup>9</sup>

Since here I am not concerned with a philological analysis of the text, I have not undertaken a detailed examination of all the various manuscripts and

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<sup>8</sup> The two most significant families are the first two. Of these two the first includes the five codices listed as B. Four of them are in Belgium (Bruxelles and Liegi) and one in Bologna. The second family contains the manuscripts of Subiaco (S), Assisi (A), Milano (M), which, according to Thier and Calufetti's hypothesis, is the Veronese version of a lost Latin codex, probably the copy of the second *redazione*. The codices of the third family seem to have been "corrupted": their text has been organized according to their content and divided into chapters. Furthermore, the copyist has transformed the style by writing everything in the first person, leaving out difficult parts and introducing interpretations. The manuscripts of this family are either in France or in Spain. The fourth and fifth families include respectively three and two manuscripts in the vernacular. The sixth family includes only one manuscript in Venice, while the manuscripts of the seventh family are in Germany.

<sup>9</sup> For a complete account of the critical editions see "Nota al testo" in Pozzi, *Il libro dell'esperienza*. Pozzi considers Thier and Calufetti's edition as a third "experiment" after the French ones by Doncoeur and Ferré. The French scholars, by discovering respectively the ms. of Assisi and of Subiaco, had shown how "corrupted" was the text used by the Bollandists. Furthermore, Pozzi attributes to the two scholars the discovery of a double version. Once again, all the statements made by Thier and Calufetti are questioned and doubted. Pozzi criticizes this latest Italian critical edition: "Hanno creduto di risolvere l'alternativa fra S e A con l'aiuto di nuove testimonianze. . . . Hanno distribuito il loro materiale in sette famiglie, ma senza giustificare in alcun modo la classificazione, né delineare, all'interno delle singole famiglie, i rapporti fra i manoscritti" (237). He also questions that the best version of the text is a ms. not in the original language (ms. M) (238). Our reading of the text, however, after some hesitation, will be based on the Thier and Calufetti edition, since it offers two very important manuscripts: one in Latin and the other, which is the most ancient text, in a Veronese dialect. Thier and Calufetti have also made several changes in their edition. In the Veronese text they have adopted what they call a "maniera razionale [my emph.] di trascrizione" (116), which consists of adding accents or eliminating the initial *h*; they have also introduced punctuation, added titles and subtitles in Italian, usually taken from different editions, in order to summarize the content of the passages.



editions. This presentation of the large number of existant manuscripts and the vast area where they are found bears out that Angela's writings have been widely read over the centuries. At the same time, however, the numerous attempts at organizing and systematizing Angela's writings make us wonder whether her work has been read or rather "mis-read." Thier and Calufetti emphasize how much the original text has been altered throughout the centuries. The starting paragraph of their foreword reads: "Dalla prima edizione degli scritti della b. Angela da Foligno, anno 1497, sono passati quasi cinque secoli. In questo lungo tempo l'opera fu ripetutamente edita in latino e in molte altre lingue. Ma tutte queste pubblicazioni seguirono un manoscritto del sec. XIV, che ha trasformato profondamente il testo originale di Angela. Così avvenne che gli scritti autentici angelani rimasero alquanto trascurati" (7).

The extent to which Angela's writings have been subjected to changes can be demonstrated by the titles given to those writings. The reader who approaches Angela may at first be puzzled by the various and different titles given to the same text. It is sufficient to take into consideration the most quoted editions, leaving aside the long and complex titles of the first editions, which would in themselves deserve an in-depth study. For example, the titles of the three well-known French editions stress a particular characteristic of the text. The edition by Ernest Hello is entitled *Le Livre des visions et instructions* (1914); that by Paul Doncoeur, *Le Livre de la Bienheureuse Angèle de Foligno*; and finally that by J. Ferré, *Le Livre de l'expérience des vrais fidèles* (1927). The Italian titles differ one from the other as much as the French ones. They seem, however, to have been somewhat influenced by the French titles, with the exception of the edition by M. Faloci Pulignani, entitled *L'autobiografia e gli scritti della beata Angela da Foligno* (1932). Faloci Pulignani may be the first scholar to underline, through the choice of the title, the autobiographical element in Angela's work. Thier and Calufetti emphasize that the title may change from one edition to the other ("Il titolo . . . è formulato e tramandato in modi diversi e molto liberi" 41). They justify their choice, *Il libro della beata Angela da Foligno* (the same as in Paul Doncoeur's edition), by saying that their title is inclusive of the whole work. They also add that Angela used to call Christ her "liber vitae" (116). Thier and Calufetti thus adopt the title of the manuscript of Assisi, which reads: *Liber sororis Lellae de fulgineo de tertio ordine sancti francisci*. The adoption of the title of the Assisi manuscript may suggest their desire to put an end to the editors' arbitrariness concerning the titles. Yet, Thier and Calufetti's choice of a title seems objectionable to Giovanni Pozzi, who entitles his anthology of Angela's writings *Il libro dell'esperienza*. The Franciscan scholar, who is rather critical of some editorial choices by Thier and Calufetti, does not seem, however, to be very consistent in selecting the title, since he himself distances the reader from what he defines as the most authoritative codex: "*Liber Lelle* è la designazione antica sul foglio di guardia del codice più autorevole, conservato ora nella Biblioteca Comunale di Assisi con la

segnatura 342" (16).

Also the division of the book has been an object of controversy. Pozzi divides the text into three parts: *Memoriale*, her interior "purification"; *Istruzioni*, including her letters and exhortations; and finally, *Transito*, the account of her illness and her death. On the other hand, Thier and Calufetti favor the division into two sections: *Memoriale* and *Instructiones*.

Obviously the editors' work has been directed at adapting, fashioning, and molding Angela's text into different shapes. Giving a form to her text seems to have been the most important question to be solved. Pozzi laments the lack of a proper title to such heterogeneous material: "Non è stato nemmeno imposto un titolo a questa congerie di brani disparati" (16). We can then ask: Why is a title so necessary? This desire to systematize and organize Angela's text may have resulted in the concealment of her voice. Instead of "hearing" Angela tell her own story, we read a story about her, for Angela remains an evanescent figure far away from the reader. Is it still possible to purge her text from the layers of notes, corrections and alterations of the editors and critics that mask her own voice?

The title of the first section of Angela's writings, sometimes recorded as *Memoriale di Fra' Arnaldo*,<sup>10</sup> suggests the interference of other voices. The presence of the Franciscan in the title makes us wonder whose life and visions are recounted in this *Memoriale*: Angela's or Fra' Arnaldo's? Since Arnaldo wrote the text, is Angela turned into a quiet, humble woman who merely intermediated between God and the writer? Or is her voice replaced by that of God? Before attempting the analysis of the text, one needs to become acquainted with Angela's life and situate her experiences within the content of Medieval mysticism.

## 2. Angela's Life: Linear vs. Cyclical Narrative

### 2.1. Tales and Legends

Since Angela's *Liber* can be considered a form of autobiography, one might expect to find in it all her biographical data. Yet, not many historical facts emerge from the emotional and religious experiences narrated there. Angela's work seems to follow the paradigms of what Kate Greenspan defines "autobiography"<sup>11</sup> when she describes the features of medieval women autobiographers as follows: "[They] often maintained a deliberate silence about

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<sup>10</sup> As we shall see later, Angela did not write her own story, but it was Fra' A. who did it for her.

<sup>11</sup> Even though here I try to free Angela's work from any systematization and categorization, the application of the genre of autobiography, which has been used by other critics before Greenspan, is aimed at pointing out the lack of "bios" in Angela's work, as is evident in the term autobiography, where "bios" has been replaced by "hagio."

external particulars that might distinguish them from their fellows. They believed that identifiable events, personalities, and sequences were bound to obscure the spiritual truth they wished to convey. . . . They often omitted parts of their lives, rearranging the remaining incidents into the larger pattern of salvation history" (159). In fact, critics and editors lament the scarcity of biographical information on Angela. For example, Paul Lachance writes: "Unfortunately, little is known of Angela's outer existence except for the bare skeleton of it which can be gleaned from the Memorial which Arnaldo has left us" (80). Surprisingly enough, Lachance devotes almost thirty pages of his dissertation to Angela's biographical profile. In fact, scholars have not been discouraged by the scarcity of information about Angela's outer experience and have integrated this scant biographical material with the account of her spiritual experience. In doing so, they have somewhat disregarded that spiritual and chronological progressions are not always reconcilable.

The most serious attempt at giving an exact chronology to her life has been done by Ferré, who provides some very detailed information about every step in her spiritual journey. Although Angela's spiritual progress is stripped of temporal details or mostly marked by the mention of liturgical days, the scholar's meticulous research provides the year and sometimes specific days for the main events of both her outer and inner experience.<sup>12</sup>

In their attempts at structuring her chronologically shapeless life, scholars might have gone as far as to "create" Angela: "Jacobilli fait naître la bienheureuse en 1249," Ferré states in a doubtful tone (31). We can question the extent to which the language of the scholars can be as powerful as to give life to a person. Lachance describes Angela's temperament before her confession in a passage overflowing with high-sounding adjectives: "Rich, proud, and beautiful, Angela possessed a spirited and quick-witted intelligence prone to irony, and an affectivity of rare sensibility. Fiery, passionate, impetuous by temperament, she also loved the comforts and luxuries of the world such as fine foods, toiletry, dancing and the admiration of others" (82). In his depiction the scholar seems to have unconsciously acquired the hyperbolic language of hagiographical rhetoric. Lachance is aware, however, that legends on Angela's life, especially before her conversion, have flourished, providing readers with tales about her sins.<sup>13</sup> In brief, the reader may wonder whether all of Angela's life has been a rhetorical construction.

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<sup>12</sup> In Angela's writings, the most typical expressions marking the flow of time are: "et tunc" (138), "postea" (152), "Et quadam vice" (154), "post istud" (156), "post narrationem istam" (166), "Et postea post modicum tempus" (170), etc. A few liturgical days are also mentioned: e.g., "In die Sabbati sancti" (296).

<sup>13</sup> Lachance writes that biographers do not generally accept popular rumors about her life. Yet, some biographers seem to accept the legend. For example, Ferré maintains that "her sin was of the flesh" (82 n5).



If we want to listen to the sound of Angela's authentic voice, it is necessary to examine the text. From a close analysis we soon realize that her biographical data can be summarized in a few paragraphs, since they are secondary to her journey towards perfection. In the account of her spiritual development she refers only obliquely to crucial events in her life, according to the pattern used by women in autohagiography, summarized by Greenspan as follows: "the crisis that precipitated their conversion, their loss of family, their rejection of marriage, their temptations" (159).

Since what we know about Angela's life can be extracted only from the *Memoriale* (and also the *Transito*), I shall limit my analysis to what is clear in the text without proposing any hypotheses. The text provides only indefinite chronological references to her spiritual crisis, occurred during the pontificate of Pope Celestine V, which lasted from April 1292 to July 1294. It is Angela herself who in the sixth supplementary step mentions that epoch: "Et incoepit iste praedictus status praedictorum tormentorum aliquo tempore ante pontificatum papae Coelestini, et duravit bene plus quam per duos annos, in quibus saepe me tormentavit" (332).<sup>14</sup> As far as the other dates attributed to her life are concerned, they are only the result of suppositions, except the date of her death, January 4, 1309, recorded by some manuscripts in a *notificatio* after the text. As Pozzi points out in the introduction to *Il libro dell'esperienza*, the dates of her birth, either 1248 or 1249, of her conversion, 1285, and of her mystical union during the trip to Assisi, 1291, have been surmised by the biographers through long and not always reliable calculations (18).<sup>15</sup>

Apart from these dates, the scant information about Angela's biography that can be surmised from her writings suggests fragmentation and circularity in her life account. In general terms, both the telling of the information and the structure of the book reflect a woman's way of thinking. In *Women's Time*, Julia Kristeva makes insightful observations concerning the perception of time by women, to whom she attributes two kinds of temporality, cyclical and monumental, which respectively stress repetition and eternity:<sup>16</sup>

On the one hand there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and

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<sup>14</sup> "E inconmenzò questo stato de li prediti tormenti alcuno tempo inanzi lo papato de papa Zelestino, e durò ben e più che per duo anni, ne li quali spesse fiate me tormentò" (353). All quotations in Latin and from the Veronese codex will be from the edition by Thier and Calufetti.

<sup>15</sup> Aliquod's statement, "A quarantatré anni Angela si consagra a Dio" (9), seems to testify to the need of exact dates.

<sup>16</sup> Kristeva's article, first published in 1979, is an extensive examination of feminism as an international movement in the 1970s. Even though written by a feminist, it is considered rather antifeminist. In it, for instance, Kristeva does not seem to approve rejecting culture and exalting the body, both considered as the main tenets of feminism.

unison with what is experienced as extrasubjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnameable jouissance. On the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence, there is the massive presence of monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word "temporality" hardly fits: All-encompassing and infinite like imaginary space, this temporality reminds one of Kronos in Hesiod's mythology, the incestuous son whose massive presence covered all of Gea in order to separate her from Ouranos, the father. Or one is reminded of the various myths of resurrection. . . .

(*Women's Time* 445)

Kristeva contrasts the conception of time as cyclical and monumental with the "time of history," perceived as linear and progressive. This antinomy is often found among social groups and ideologies, for cyclical time is often associated with marginal groups who oppose themselves to dominant thought. In fact, Kristeva argues that cyclical and monumental time, besides being linked to female subjectivity, can be found in several civilizations and experiences, "particularly mystical ones" (*Women's Time* 446).

Critics may have disregarded this concept of cyclical time as an appropriate tool for the analysis of mystical writings and have tried to describe Angela's life and work according to a linear unfolding of time. In so doing, however, they have accepted the linear conception of time predominant in male Western thought. This desire to find a beginning, a progression, and a point of arrival in Angela's work is exemplified by Ferré in his previously mentioned article entitled "Les Principales dates de la vie d'Angèle de Foligno." The author compiles a table of the years, months and seasons, not only of the main facts in Angela's life, but also of the steps leading to her spiritual perfection, especially the seven supplementary steps (34). We shall see, however, how Angela's experience resists any attempts at being structured according to a linear form. The text, in fact, opposes linearity on the levels of the structure and the telling. Before proceeding to the analysis of the *Memoriale* in order to extract some information about Angela's biography told by her own voice, I shall give an account of the structure of the *Memoriale* itself.

Its beginning, written by *Frater A.*, announces thirty steps, which illustrate Angela's spiritual ascent. Yet, since the initial plan is not fulfilled, the *Memoriale* shows a rather asymmetrical and irregular structure. The text can be roughly divided into two parts: the first part includes the beginning up to the twentieth step; that is, from the moment, marked by her confession, when Angela repents of her sins, until the journey to Assisi, when she first experiences the mystical union; the second part goes from the first to the seventh supplementary step. The twentieth step (also part of the first supplementary step) is, however, interrupted by *Frater A.*'s voice, who wants to tell the reader that what follows is what Angela first dictated to him, that is, the extraordinary Assisi event: "Iste passus qui hic scribitur vicesimus est prima scriptura quam

ego frater, qui indignus scripsi, habui et audivi ab ore ipsius fidelis Christi referentis (156).<sup>17</sup> The friar *scriptor* relates further difficulties on those occasions when he was not allowed to speak to Angela. He decided to divide the great amount of material available to him into seven supplementary steps or revelations (48). He then goes on to give a short *compendium* of these steps, also hinting at the overlapping of the sixth and seventh steps (51), and showing how his attempts at shaping the material often result in failure.

What I have presented makes it clear that while *Frater A.* tries diligently and incessantly to organize the text, he indirectly lets the reader know about the fictitiousness of the text's linear form. The circularity of the structure is conveyed by the friar's comments, which, at the end of the twentieth step, make the readers aware that what they have just read has been written after what they are going to read: the middle section takes the place of the initial section, thereby forming a circular sequence. This form of narrative may be likened to the rhetorical figure called *hysteron proteron*, which Richard A. Lanham describes as a "form of Hyperbaton" with "syntax or sense out of normal logical or temporal order" (89). We can expand this figure by applying it to the order of the whole text, that is, its structure. This rhetorical strategy, in fact, is repeated on a larger scale: circularity is not limited to the first twenty steps, but it is extended to the whole book, since the ending sends back to the middle and to the opening sections, where *Frater A.* repeats the same words concerning his writing and Angela's speaking. At the close we read his profession of faithfulness as a scribe:

Item ego frater scriptor cum magno timore et reverentia et cum multa festinatione scripsi, sicut ab ore praedictae fidelis Christi, dum ipsa praesens mecum loquebatur, capere poteram, non addens aliquid de meo a principio usque ad finem, sed multa dimittens de illis bonis quae dicebat, quia ego non poteram ea capere intellectu meo nec scribere.

Et ipsa loquebatur de se in prima persona; sed accidebat aliquando quod ego scribebam in tertia persona propter festinationem, quod et ego non correxi. Et a principio usque ad finem vix aliquid scripsi nisi quando ipsa praesens loquebatur.

(400)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> "Questo passo vigiesimo che qui se scrive è la prima scrittura che io frate scrittore èbi et udi' da la dita fedel de Cristo" (157).

<sup>18</sup> "Et io, frate scrittore, con grande tremore e reverenzia e con molta fretta scrissi como da la boca de la dita fedelle de Cristo, mentre parlava con meco, sì como comprendere potea, non azonzendo io niente del mio dal principio in fine al fine, ma molto lasando de quelle cosse otime che me disse, inperziocché io non le poteva intendere, ni comprendere con el mio intendimento, ni scriverle.

Et ela me parlava de sì in prima persona; ma adiveneva ch'io alguna fiata scriveva in terza persona — per la fretta — la qualle io non coresì. E dal prinzipio in fine in lo fine appena alcuna cosa scrissi, se non quando essa presente parlava" (401).



The same concern for the act of writing had already been expressed before the first supplementary step, which we can consider as the end of the first phase:

. . . nolebam aliquid scribere postquam recedebam ab ea. Sed et quando scribens sedebam cum ea, faciebam mihi verbum quod debebam scribere ab ea pluries iterari. Et illud quod ego scripsi in tertia persona, ipsa dicebat semper, loquendo de se, in prima persona, sed accidebat mihi quod ego scribebam in tertia persona propter festinationem et adhuc non correxi illud. (172)<sup>19</sup>

In the prologue *Frater A.* had already expressed the same concern in a more condensed manner:

Quam experientiam et ipsius experientiae doctrinam ipse Deus suos fideles facit probare plenissime. Et hic etiam nuper per aliquam suorum fidelium ad devotionem suorum praedictam experientiam et doctrinam fecit aliquid indicare, quae minus plene et multum diminute et detruncate in veritate tamen, in verbis sequentibus describuntur. (128-30)<sup>20</sup>

In addition, *Frater A.*, in the prologue, middle, and final sections, reiterates the idea that he was forced ("coactus") to write.

In spite of his insistence on truthfulness and reliability, *Frater A.* elaborates on Angela's words, as he himself states several times when speaking of the work's structure. For instance, he maintains that it has been very difficult for him to give a form to her words:

Et quia etiam a XIX passu deinceps nescivi alios passus distinguendo certitudinaliter numerare, studui cetera omnia quae hic amodo sequuntur sub VII passibus vel revelationibus coartare . . . nec non et sicut cogitavi mihi esse convenientius et aptius faciendum. (160)<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> ". . . non voleva niente altro scriver poi ch'io mi partiva da lei. Ma quando scrivendo sedeva apresso de lei, la parola ch'io doveva scriver me faceva plui volte narare. E quello ch'io da lei scripsi como de terza persona, senpre essa diceva in prima persona parlando, ma adivenivame ch'io lo scriveva in terza persona per la freza, e ancora no lo coresi" (173).

<sup>20</sup> "La qual esperienza e la doctrina de la quale esso Dio i suoi fedeli fa provare pienamente. E qui nuovamente alcuna de le suo fedele a devozione de li suo servi la dita esperienza e doctrina fe' in alcuna maniera mostrare, la qual cosa mai pienamente e molto diminutamente e ditroncate, in veritate inperanto, ne le parole sequenti sono descripte" (131).

<sup>21</sup> "E perzioché de lo dezimo nono passo in poi non sepi li altri pasi distinguendo zertamente numerare studiàime tute le cose, che qui scriverò ormai, de aconzare in septe pasi over revelazioni . . . e como me pensai che me fosse più convenevole et aconzio a fare" (161).

*Frater A.*'s attempt at arranging Angela's effusions into different sections points out once again men's rational tendency to give form and linearity to something shapeless: the friar tries to give an exact and finished form to the fluid and amorphous material produced by the woman mystic. To this end, he writes a beginning and a conclusion in order to give the material a sense of closure.

The manipulation of Angela's words has then started since their first compilation. Not only have critics and editors, throughout the centuries, sought to efface her text through their desire of linear temporality, but also *Frater A.*, the *scriptor*, organizes her words. Lachance approvingly attributes to the friar a greater ability to organize the material in the last two supplementary steps, while for the rest he has limited himself to transcribing and juxtaposing: "the sixth and seventh supplementary steps bear the mark of greater redactional effort on his part. Seemingly intent on crowning his effort, he deduces the doctrine, establishes synchronisms and is generally more attentive to composition" (117). According to Lachance, the *Memoriale* is a text that merits "great trust" (120).

## 2.2. Unstructured Life Account

After analyzing the transformations undergone by Angela's text, we can now start to give information about her life in the order presumably dictated by Angela. The first reference to Angela's outer life concerns her confession. It is likely that she speaks about this confession before anything else, because it marks the beginning of her re-birth. These are the first words she utters according to *Frater A.*'s account: "Et mane statim ivi ad Sanctum Franciscum et redii cito. Et in reditu inveni unum fratrem praedicantem in Sancto Feliciano, et erat ille frater capellanus episcopi" (133).<sup>22</sup>

Only later in the text, at the ninth step, do we become acquainted with her past life. In accordance with what she is told, she gives away all her belongings in order to begin her spiritual journey:

Et fuit mihi instructa et illuminata et demonstrata via crucis isto modo, scilicet quia inspiratum est mihi quod si volebam ire ad crucem expoliarem me ut essem magis levis, et nuda irem ad crucem, *scilicet* quod parcerem omnibus qui me offendissent et expoliarem me de omnibus terrenis et de omnibus hominibus et feminis et de omnibus amicis et parentibus et de omnibus aliis et de possessione mea et de meis, et cor meum darem Christo qui mihi praedicta beneficia fecerat, et irem per viam spinosam scilicet tribulationis.

(136-38)<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> "E la domane incontenente andai a San Francesco e retornai tosto. E ne la tornata trovai uno frate che predicava in San Feliziano, e quello frate era capelano del vescovo" (134).

<sup>23</sup> "E fui inluminata e fòme insingnata la via de la croxe in questo modo, zioè ch'io mi spolgiàse e fosse piui liziera, e nuda a la croxe andàse, zioè ch'io perdonàse quelli che me avevano ofexo e

Through renouncing her possessions, Angela patterns her new life after St. Francis's rule: "Et tunc incoepi dimittere pannos meliores et de cibariis et de pannis capitis" (138).<sup>24</sup> She repeatedly speaks about her wealth. In the sixteenth step she also addresses the friar *scriptor*, who wanted to convince her not to give away everything, probably to avoid being accused of any possible association with heretical sects:

Unde et tunc datum est mihi desiderium expropriandi me cum tanta voluntate quod, quamvis impugnarer multum a daemone ut illud non facerem et saepe temptarer inde, et quamvis prohiberetur mihi a fratribus et a te et ab omnibus a quibus conveniebat me habere consilium, nullo tamen modo potuissim abstinere pro omnibus malis et bonis quae potuissent mihi fieri.

(144-46)<sup>25</sup>

Finally, in chapter eighteen she informs the reader about the sale of her most valuable property: "Et istud accidit mihi in prima vice quando vendideram casalenum ut darem pauperibus, et erat melior terra quam habebam" (152).<sup>26</sup> Later on, however, when mentioning her journey to Assisi in the twentieth step, she remarks that her love for the poor was not perfect yet: "et non recolo quod adhuc perfecissem ego erogare omnia; immo adhuc non compleveram dare omnia pauperibus" (156).<sup>27</sup> Angela still holds on to some earthly possessions.

When first speaking about her desire to become poor, she also mentions her husband: "Et eram cum viro meo" (138).<sup>28</sup> The information about her married life is expanded when she relates the death of all her family members. We then learn that she had children and that probably her mother lived with her: "Et factum est, volente Deo, quod illo tempore mortua fuit mater mea, quae erat mihi magnum impedimentum. Et postea mortuus est vir meus et omnes filii in brevi tempore" (138).<sup>29</sup> After reading this brief and essential biographical

spogliàseme de tute le cose terene e da tuti li omeni e femene, amizi e parenti e da altri e da la mia posesion e de mi medexima, e lo mio cuore desse a Iesu Cristo et andàse per la via spinosa, zioè de la tribulazione" (130).

<sup>24</sup> "Et allora comencai a lasar i panni milgiori e de li panni de capo" (139).

<sup>25</sup> "Onde allora mi fùe dato da Dio dexiderio de expropriarme con tanta voluntade che, avegna ch'io fosse dal demonio molto tentata che dubitava che questo non fazèse, e spesse fiata de questo dubio era tentata, inperoché per nulo modo mi poteva astenere per tuti li mali e bene che mi se potesseno fare" (145-47).

<sup>26</sup> "E questo m'avvenne la prima fiata quando io èbi venduto lo caxal mio per dar ai puoveri, et era la mior terra ch'io avèse" (153).

<sup>27</sup> "e non m'aricorda che ancora avèse dato tuto lo mio; e ancora non l'aveva compito di dare tuto a li poveri" (157).

<sup>28</sup> "E sì stava con el mio marito" (139).

<sup>29</sup> "E piazendo a Dio che morise in quello tenpo la mia madre, la quale m'era inpedimento grande. E poi lo mio marito e tutti li miei fioli in breve tenpo morirono" (139).



information, we may wonder how Lachance can provide the following detailed description: "As was the custom of the time, Angela married when she was still young. She gave birth to several *sons* [my emphasis]. She was surrounded by a wordly, superficial mother who adulated her and her husband, likely a mediocre man" (82). Lachance quotes no document. Has he too appropriated the legends to which he has previously alluded?

What we come across next has caused much discussion about her ability to read:

Quadam vice dum eram in carcere, in quo recluseram me pro Quadragesima Maiori, et diligerem et meditarer in uno verbo Evangelii, quod verbum erat maximae dignationis et excessivae dilectionis, dum eram iuxta unum librum, scilicet Missale, et sitirem videre illud verbum saltem tantummodo scriptum; et vix, comprimens et coercens me, timore superbiae continuissem me ne dictum librum prae nimia siti et amore meis manibus aperirem, quodam somno sopita in ipso desiderio obdormivi, et statim ducta fui in visione.

(148-50)<sup>30</sup>

Could Angela read Latin, and, if so, was she also able to write? One can ask these questions *ad infinitum*, and yet the text will provide no clear and definitive answer.

At the beginning of step twenty, she speaks about her journey to Assisi: "Vicesimo, post istud ivi ad Sanctum Franciscum Assisium" (156).<sup>31</sup> But her narration is interrupted by *Frater A.*, who wants to inform the reader why he was compelled to write, or rather transcribe, Angela's experience, how he will organize the work, and how what follows was written first: "Iste passus qui hic scribitur vicesimus est prima scriptura quam ego frater, qui indignus scripsi, habui et audiui ab ore ipsius fidelis Christi referentis" (156).<sup>32</sup> Then the *scriptor* gives his version of Angela's journey to Assisi and her "shouting" in the church, while seeking to explain the reason of his writing: "Causa vero vel ratio quare incoepi scribere fuit ex parte ista, videlicet quia praedicta persona fidelis Christi quadam vice venerat Assisium ad Sanctum Franciscum, ubi ego morabar

<sup>30</sup> "Una fiata mentre era in carcere, ne la qualle m'era serata per la Quarexema Mazore, e diligentemente pensava una parola del Vanzielo la qual era parolla de masima degnazione e dilectione exzesiva, mentre era appresso d'uno libro, zioè Mesalle, e dexiderio aveva de vedere quella parolla solamente scripta; et aperta per paura de superbia, comprimendome e constrengiendome, me potesse contenere che con le mie mane non aprise quello libro per lo grande dexiderio e amore, e sopita d'uno sonpno, in questo dexiderio dormi', et incontenente fui menata in vixione" (149-50).

<sup>31</sup> "Nel vigieximo passo, dapo' questo che àzo dito, andai a San Francesco d'Asixe" (157).

<sup>32</sup> "Questo passo vigieximo che qui se scrive è la prima scrittura che io frate scrittore èbi et udi' da la dita fedel de Cristo" (157)

conventualis, et striderat multum sedens in introitu ostii ecclesiae" (168).<sup>33</sup> Later on he reiterates: "Et hic est principium quomodo et quando coepi scribere postquam acciderat illi fideli Christi illud stridere sive vociferari in Sancto Francisco, sicut praedictum est in praecedenti narratione" (176).<sup>34</sup> Finally, it is Angela's turn to give her version of her ecstatic rapture during her journey to Assisi, and how she started shouting when the Holy Spirit left her: "Et tunc post discessum coepi stridere alta voce vel vociferari, et sine aliqua verecundia stridebam et clamabam . . ." (184).<sup>35</sup> Thus, through the repetition of the same event, the time of the narrative is expanded in such a way that the reader perceives temporality as cyclical.

The references to Assisi do not end here. At the opening of the second step Angela announces that a year has gone by since her journey to Assisi (200), although a few pages later we read: "Item per viam illam Sancti Francisci, in prima vice locutionis . . ." (214).<sup>36</sup> Angela mentions Assisi again at the end of her *Memoriale*, most likely still referring to the same pilgrimage (Thier and Calufetti 373n25): "Et quamdiu ego fui ibi Assisii, plus quam per novem dies quibus fui ibi, omni die habui locutionem beati Francisci" (376).<sup>37</sup>

*Frater A.* also provides some information concerning his own relation to Angela and her birthplace. Referring to her shouting, he comments: "De quo facto ego, qui eram suus confessor et consanguineus et etiam consiliarius praecipuus et singularis . . ." (168).<sup>38</sup> In two different occasions he alludes to Foligno, where Angela was born: "Et postea post modicum tempus reversus fui de Assisio ad terram nostram de qua eramus ipsa et ego" (170);<sup>39</sup> a little further down, he reiterates the same words: "Reversus ego de Assisio ad terram nostram, de qua terra et ipsa fidelis Christi erat . . ." (176).<sup>40</sup> When the friar mentions that Angela had prayed that she might be able to follow the Franciscan rule, he also suggests that Angela had taken the habit of the Third Order of St. Francis:

Et inter alia rogaverat beatum Franciscum quod ipse rogaret Deum pro ea ut ipsa sentiret de Christo, et quod gratiam sibi acquireret beatus Franciscus a

<sup>33</sup> "Inperzioché la predita fedel de Cristo una fiata era venuta a la zità d'Asixii a San Franzesco, ove io era conventuale, e sedendo ne l'usio de la chiesia, aveva cridado molto" (169).

<sup>34</sup> "E qui si è lo prinzipio come e quando io comencai a descrivere, poi che quella fedel de Cristo li avvenne quello stridere in Santo Franzesco, come è dito ne la precedente narazione" (177).

<sup>35</sup> "E allora dapò lo dipartimento comencai a cridare e stridere, e senza vergogna strideva e cridava" (185).

<sup>36</sup> "Ancora in quella via di San Franzesco, ne la prima fiata de lo parlamento" (215).

<sup>37</sup> "E mentre fui in Asixii, che fo per spazio de più de nove dì, ogni dì ebi parlamento da san Franzesco" (377).

<sup>38</sup> "De la qual cossa io, che ièra suo confesore e parente e conseliere apiziale" (169).

<sup>39</sup> "E dapo' poco, ritornando d'Asixii a la zità nostra, de la qual eravamo essa e io (171).

<sup>40</sup> "Retornato io, frate, d'Asixii a la terra nostra, de la qual io e essa fedel de Cristo eramo nati" (177).

Deo, qua ipsa servaret bene regulam beati Francisci quam noviter promiserat, et maxime pro hoc scilicet quod faceret eam esse et finire vere pauperem.

(178)<sup>41</sup>

According to the Franciscan rule, the first command was that of poverty. Angela seems to have strictly kept that rule, for she (like St. Francis himself) went to Rome for that purpose:

Tantum enim ipsa desiderabat habere perfectam paupertatem quod propter hanc tantum, ut beatus Petrus apostolus acquireret ei a Christo ut fieret vere pauper, Roman iverat ad rogandum beatum Petrum pro im[pe]tranda praedicta gratia verae paupertatis.

(178)<sup>42</sup>

Angela, in fact, follows the Franciscan rule and closely imitates St. Francis's conduct by carrying out such charitable works as the service to the poor, the sick, and the lepers (242).

As is obvious, in spite of the biographers' attempts to provide the readers with a detailed account of Angela's life, the information found in the text is fragmented and reiterated. By forcing a chronology upon her life account, Angela's biographers seek to adapt her life to Western male paradigms, thus failing to give full due to her writings. According to hagiographical conventions, her life ought to be viewed as an *exemplum* of conversion and spiritual transformation, leaving behind the fallen daughter of Eve and becoming an ideal Christian woman.<sup>43</sup> Angela's life has no noteworthy characteristics, thus following the life pattern of any pious medieval woman. Her life account conforms thus to the normative "life," or rather to the hagiographical representations of life of her mystic foremothers.<sup>44</sup> Obviously, Angela had models with which she could identify and which she could appropriate, since many women in the Middle Ages devoted their lives to spiritual activities. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in fact, had seen a flowering of women mystics

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<sup>41</sup> "Et infra le altre cosse aveva pregato san Francesco che pregàse Dio per lei che essa sentisse de Cristo, e che li atrovàse grazia de Cristo per la quale essa bene osservàse la regola de santo Francesco, la quale nuovamente essa aveva promessa, e masimamente che la fazèssere essere e fenire in veraze povertà" (179).

<sup>42</sup> "Inperziocché tanto dexiderava d'avere la perfeta povertà che per questa tanto, azioché santo Pietro apostolo li atrovàse da Cristo ch'ela fosse veraze povera, andò a Roma per pregàrlone" (179).

<sup>43</sup> Greespan maintains that "To assume that standard medieval topoi in women's writings must be expressions of actual experience is to ignore one of the essential features of medieval literature, both religious and secular" (165-6)

<sup>44</sup> Later on in the discussion we shall also see how Angela has to follow a formula in order to be enabled to speak.



especially in Italy, France, Flanders, and the Rhineland (*A History of Women* 314). It is within the phenomenon of mysticism characteristic of her epoch that Angela's life needs to be viewed.

### 3. Women Mystics: Interpretations and Misinterpretations

#### 3.1. *Beguines and Tertiaries: Unorganized Groups*

Toril Moi makes us re-think the implications of the word mysticism, when, in her *Sexual/Textual Politics*, she draws our attention to the French feminists' attack on words ending in 'ism.' She "explains" the feminists' tendency to reject labels on these grounds: "because they see such labelling activity as betraying a phallogocentric drive to stabilize, organize and rationalize our conceptual universe. They argue that it is masculine rationality that has always privileged reason, order, unity and lucidity, and that it has done so by silencing and excluding the irrationality, chaos and fragmentation that has come to represent femininity" (159-60). Even though Moi, following some contemporary feminists, does not agree with a clear opposition between masculine and feminine values, she sees in the term "mysticism" the masculine propensity towards rationalization.

Since its first appearance, mysticism, an experience well described only by adjectives such as unutterable and ineffable, has been systematized. In the entry "Mystique" in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique* we read: "Il est très difficile d'écrire l'histoire de la mystique médiévale de façon quelque peu scientifique" (1902); and further down: "on ignore presque tout de l'expérience elle-même" (1903). Yet, the authors provide a fairly organized and well structured description of the phenomenon, dividing it under different headings: typology, constitutive elements, the mystical itinerary, and a historical survey of mysticism. They distinguish, however, between men mystics and women mystics by attributing to women mystics a resistance to the theological rules followed by men: "Tandis que les hommes, formés au système bien établi d'une école théologique, paraissent incapables de sortir des rails conceptuels de ce système, les femmes osent développer un mode de pensée original et dynamique, qui correspond davantage au caractère de l'expérience . . ." (1906).

Further developing this idea of absence of discipline in women's mystical experiences, Caroline Walker Bynum emphasizes that the great flowering of women mystics in the late Middle Ages was in fact difficult to channel and organize: "The amorphous groups in which beguines, tertiaries and laywomen often found themselves are labelled 'anti-institutional' or 'a-institutional,' because they lacked rules, complex structures, permanent vows, hierarchical leadership roles, endowments and so on" (*Fragmentation* 64-65). Walker Bynum offers a fresh view of mysticism by underlining the women's resistance to institutional forms. At the same time, she points out scholars' enduring and

continuous desire to include women mystics in precise movements.<sup>45</sup> This eagerness to enclose everything in a frame is exemplified by the fact that even though most female saints were laywomen, they were nevertheless linked with an official religious affiliation, as Walker Bynum suggests: "Earlier in this century, scholars often fought over which order could claim certain female saints as members. Recent research suggests that some of these women belonged to no order; they were simply laywomen being religious" (*Fragmentation* 64).

The piety of women eluded an institutional organization: beguines and tertiaries had no rules (except for their refusal of marriage), no complex structures, no permanent vows, and no fully accepted hierarchical leadership. In Northern Europe, mainly in the Low Countries, the beguines started establishing their communities in the early thirteenth century, and their activity combined prayer and work. They often founded hospitals and leprosariums. Groups of beguines later became present also in Italy, but they often continued to live in their households. These women were commonly known as tertiaries. In fact, as Walker Bynum points out, beguines and tertiaries were very similar, at least in the beginning, since they did not have a fixed structure, as the scholar maintains: "the basic characteristics of women's piety cut across the lines between lay and monastic, heterodox and orthodox, churchly and sectarian" (*Fragmentation* 63).

Such religious women profited from their exemption from rules until the late fourteenth century when they became similar to religious orders, thus coming closer to the clergy than to the laity. It is only after the Council of Trent that they were unconditionally directed into a structured and approved form of religious life.

The evidence is that in the Middle Ages women mystics outnumbered men mystics. Why did women raise their voice for the first time *exactly* with mysticism? Efforts to comprehend the phenomenon of female mysticism have come from fields other than theology. Sociologists and historians have provided many explanations: from a surplus of women in the population to economic reasons (Klapish-Zuber 312 and Walker-Bynum 58). From a psychoanalytical perspective, mysticism has also been identified with the quintessential model of the feminine: passivity, lack of rational faculties, offensive and hysterical speech. This "negative" reading has been partly encouraged by feminist studies,

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<sup>45</sup> Also Leonardi, in the introduction to *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, alludes to women mystics' independence from institutions, which he sees, however, as a phenomenon typical of Italy. In fact, after having listed some early women mystics outside Italy, such as Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch, Mathilde of Magdeburg, Geltrude of Hefta, and Marguerite Porète, Leonardi points out that these religious women were connected with monastic orders, with the exception of Marguerite Porète. He then distinguishes Italian mystics for their independence from monastic rules and describes them as connected with mendicant orders. He considers St. Francis the "father" of this mysticism open to the world, and Clare of Montefalco and Margaret of Cortona as his followers.

where the analysis, rather than being directed towards classifying and systematizing the phenomenon, has been concerned with exploring women's position inside mysticism.

### 3.2 Two Feminists Look at Mysticism

Simone de Beauvoir, one of the earliest feminist scholars, and Luce Irigaray, a leading contemporary critic, express two opposing views of mysticism.<sup>46</sup> De Beauvoir sees mysticism in a total negative light, attributing to it a sado-masochist character. She concludes her discussion by inviting women to free themselves of any mystical tendencies through "positive action into human society" (678). Such a drastic condemnation of mysticism and the decision not to consider as mystics those women who showed theological and intellectual preoccupations make de Beauvoir an easy target of contemporary feminist criticism.<sup>47</sup>

Luce Irigaray presents mysticism in a more positive light. In the middle section of *Speculum of the Other Woman* she dedicates a passage to mysticism, "La mystérique," a term conflating the two terms mystical and hysterical. However different, Irigaray's and de Beauvoir's discussions are not incompatible. Irigaray tries to debunk the view of mysticism as a passive state, while seeking to give a new vision, or re-vision, of mysticism. She analyzes and expands the points dealt with by de Beauvoir. For example, Irigaray stresses the fact that mysticism is a typical feminine phenomenon; consequently, male mystics are left with the imitation, or rather, in Irigaray's words, with the "mimicking" of women. In doing so, men abandon their rationality: "This is the place where 'she' — and in some cases 'he,' if he follows 'her' lead — speaks about . . . contempt for form as such, about mistrust for understanding as an obstacle along the path of jouissance and mistrust for the dry desolation of reason" (*Spéculum* 191). By presenting understanding and reason as male attributes, Irigaray falls into the trap of using and reinforcing a somewhat essentialist approach. In fact, most feminists want to do away with that essentialism promoted by patriarchy, that is, labelling women as intuitive, emotional and imaginative, as well as associating men with reason and rationality. Instead of deconstructing patriarchal logic, Irigaray seems to suggest that it is through the acceptance of patriarchal

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<sup>46</sup> Both de Beauvoir and Irigaray mention Angela of Foligno. It is interesting to notice that Angela has been examined by several French literary critics, among whom Kristeva and Georges Batailles. In Italy, however, she has been neglected by scholars outside the theological field.

<sup>47</sup> For instance, in her article "Feminism, Abjection, Transgression: Angela of Foligno and the Twentieth Century," Mazzoni dismisses de Beauvoir's discussion of Angela of Foligno and female mysticism as very "simplistic" (63). Yet, one needs to historicize the French scholar's intervention: she was writing in an epoch when socialism sought to include women in the class struggle. In fact, in spite of some shortcomings, de Beauvoir anticipates those questions that are still the main focus of interest, such as the relationship between the woman mystic and her body.



subjection that women can discover themselves, thus escaping male rationality and investigation. Within mysticism and through her imitation of Christ's suffering, the female mystic discovers a public place that enables her to speak.

Even though Irigaray's treatment of mysticism might seem excessive, the language she employs is of much interest. In fact, Irigaray's impressive discussion strikes the reader as a very successful attempt to reproduce a mystic's nebulous state of mind: "This is the place where consciousness is no longer master, where, to its extreme confusion, it sinks into a dark night that is also fire and flames" (191). The ambiguity and plurality of meanings in Irigaray's text show how the closure normally imposed on meaning and language can be opened up. Irigaray's employment of a syntax free from grammatical rules (i.e., the switching of pronouns and tenses) and of a vocabulary rich in rhetorical figures, such as oxymorons and tautologies, gives her text a poetic flavor. Here is how she renders the confused state of the mystic: "Expectant expectancy, absence of project and projections. Unbearable sweetness and bitterness, aridity, dizzy horror before the boundless void" (194).

But how can we relate such words by Irigaray to Angela's language, which is simple, and direct? In analyzing Angela's text, are we willing to see Angela's experience as an annihilation of the self, as de Beauvoir suggests, or shall we appropriate Irigaray's statement and consider mysticism as "the only place in Western history where woman speaks and acts in such a public way" (238)? Or will we find for Angela's voice an intermediate space through which she, as a mystic, succeeded in creating a place for her own voice in the text and in the world?

#### 4. Angela in the Borderlines of Patriarchal Construction

##### 4.1. Legitimizing Angela's Voice.

In order to "speak up," Angela has to legitimize her voice through references to authorities, such as the Bible, the Church Fathers or the mystic tradition. Angela's voice would have been censured from public discourse, had she not used a recognizable sub-text. Such historical, literary, and biblical references can be found in Pozzi's edition of Angela's writings, *Il libro dell'esperienza*. Pozzi provides such a detailed explanation for some excerpts from the *Liber* that at times his glosses are longer than the text itself.

Pozzi presents Angela's account of her life as an "acting out" of episodes in the Bible or religious writings: "certi atti e atteggiamenti della vita della penitente si spiegano come messa in scena spettacolare di racconti devoti o di esempi biblici" (18). Angela's behavior, which would most likely astound a modern reader, was in fact an "old tale." Notice, for instance, the striking carelessness towards the death of her family members:

Et factum est, volente Deo, quod illo tempore mortua fuit mater mea, quae erat mihi magnum impedimentum. Et postea mortuus est vir meus et omnes filii in brevi tempore. Et quia incoeperam viam praedictam et rogaveram Deum quod morerentur, magnam consolationem inde habui scilicet de morte eorum.

(138)<sup>48</sup>

This description of the death of her family is tantamount to a “representation” of Christ’s words that emphasize his followers’ need to feel hatred for the members of their families (Luke 14:26; Matt. 10:37). And yet, later on she refers to the pain caused by the death of her family, a grief exceeded by that of living: “Et vivere erat mihi poena super dolorem mortis matris et filiorum et super omnem dolorem quem possem cogitare” (186). The equally astonishing episode describing Angela in the act of stripping off her clothes and standing naked next to the Crucifix in the eighth step (“Sed in ista cognitione crucis dabatur mihi tantus ignis quod, stando iuxta crucem, expoliavi me omnia vestimenta mea et totam me obtuli ei” 136) refers back to the saying, inspired by St. Paul’s words, “nudus nudum Christum sequi.”<sup>49</sup>

According to Pozzi, the crucial event of the journey to Assisi is molded on the episode of the resurrected Jesus who appeared to two disciples on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). In a similar manner, according to Pozzi, the Holy Spirit takes possession of Angela on her way to Assisi. Even the most repugnant episode in the *Liber* has “authoritative” antecedents. Angela tells us that during the third step, on Holy Thursday, she went with her woman companion to a nearby hospital, where she washed the hands and feet of lepers and then drank some of the washwater:

Et postquam ista obtulimus eis, lavimus pedes feminarum et lavimus manus hominum, maxime cuiusdam leprosi qui habebat manus valde fracidas vel marcidas et perditas, et bibimus de illa lotura.

(242)<sup>50</sup>

This episode has striking similarities in St. Francis’s life. According to the

<sup>48</sup> “E piazendo a Dio che morìe in quello tempo la mia madre, la quale m’era impedimento grande. E poi lo mio marito e tuti li mie fioli in breve tempo morino. Et imperzioché io aveva di poco tempo comenziata la dita via, et aveva pregato Dio che morìeno, grande consolazione èbi de la soa morte. . . .”

<sup>49</sup> Angela might also have been inspired by a similar gesture by St. Francis, who disrobed in front of his father and the bishop of Assisi. (“[Francesco] depose tutti quanti i vestiti . . .” *Fonti francescane* 1023). For the Pauline saying see 1 Co 4:11; 2 Co 11:27.

<sup>50</sup> “E poi che queste cosse avèmo fate, lavàmo li piedi de le femene e le mane de li puoveri, masimamente uno lebroxo che aveva le mane molto fragiele e marze e pùtride, e poi bevèmo de quella lavatura” (243).

*Leggenda perugina*, in fact, St. Francis reproached a friar who had taken a leper into the Porziuncola, but later, having become aware of his own fault, St. Francis forced himself to eat from the same dish of the leper.<sup>51</sup> For both St. Francis and Angela the contact with people infected with leprosy is a way of overcoming the power of the senses.

Through examples such as these, based on authoritative male texts, Angela legitimizes her voice and is thus allowed to speak. The acceptance of her writings by her contemporaries derives also from similarities shared with other female mystics. Pozzi remarks that their life accounts are so similar that they seem copied one from the other (*Il libro dell'esperienza* 20). For instance, "tears" and the "embrace with Christ" are two canonical steps in the spiritual journey of women mystics.

In addition to biblical, exegetical and literary references, some of Pozzi's remarks corroborate the idea that Angela was forced to enact an already established formula: "Il lettore vede da sé quanto coincidano anche i moti dell'anima li *teorizzati* [my emphasis] con quelli che Angela narra di aver provato di sé" (119). Pozzi further comments on Angela's words concerning her mystical penetration in Christ's side, which is also found in numerous women's mystics: "Et iacui et perdidit loquelam et membra. Et videbatur mihi quod tunc anima intravit intus in latus Christi. Et erat non tristitia, immo tanta laetitia quod narrari non potest" (278). Pozzi not only traces this experience back to Cistercian and Franciscan traditions, but goes on to give detailed explanations of Angela's reference to Christ's breast instead of His heart: "La beata parla di 'costato' e non di 'cuore': questo perché la devozione allora corrente aveva per oggetto la piaga del costato (raffigurata sempre a destra) e non ancora, almeno in forma esplicita, il cuore di Cristo" (134). Angela was clearly bound to existing traditions.

Another episode that appears time and again in previous experiences by "visionarie" is the embrace of Christ's dead body. This episode goes back to a sermon by George of Nicodemia (ninth century), who describes the Virgin Mary embracing the body of Christ (Pozzi 146). Angela's text reads:

In die Sabbati sancti post supradicta, illa fidelis Christi retulit mihi admirabiles laetitias quas habuerat de Deo. Et inter alia retulit mihi frati scriptori quod ipso die ipsa Christi fidelis, facta in excessu mentis, stetit in sepulcro simul cum Christo. Et dixit quod osculata fuit primo pectus Christi — et vedebat eum iacentem oculis clausis sicut iacuit mortuus — et postea osculata est os eius; ex quo ore dicebat quod admirabilem et inenarrabiliter

<sup>51</sup> The the two episodes' similarities are evident: "il lebbroso era tutto una piaga; le dita con le quali prendeva il cibo erano contratte e sanguinolente, così che ogni volta che le immergeva nella scodella, vi colava dentro il sangue" (*Leggenda perugina*, in *Fonti francescane* 1185-86).



delectabilem odorem acceperat, qui respirabat ex ore eius; sed hic dixit quod fuit parva mora.

(296)<sup>52</sup>

This experience, however, is not presented by Angela, but by the *frater scriptor*. Thus Angela's voice, besides being legitimized mostly through male sub-texts that act as hidden narratives to Angela's experiences, has also been "written" by a male scribe.

#### 4.2. A Male Scribe for a Female Voice

Angela's voice would not have been heard, had not *Frater A.* transcribed her words. In fact, in the Middle Ages it was rather unusual for women to be able to write (*A History of Women* 448). Furthermore, since women were forbidden to preach, in order to be transcribed and thus be made public their word needed to be filtered through and sanctioned by male authorities.<sup>53</sup> Angela's text was not only written by a male scribe, but it also received male sanction: by God, by two Friars Minor and by Cardinal Giacomo Colonna. It was *Frater A.* who on several occasions, as a mediator, requested the sanction of male authorities. Throughout the text he asks time and again for God's seal, which is finally expressed through Angela's words:

Et ipsa praedicta fidelis Christi respondit mihi ita dicens: Antequam tu diceres mihi istud, ego pluries rogavi Deum ut ipse faceret me scire si in illis quae dixi et quae tu scripsisti esset aliquod verbum mendacii vel superfluum, ut saltem possem ego inde confiteri. . . . Et postea dixit: Ego sigillabo illud. Et cum ego non intelligerem quid esset dicere 'ego sigillabo illud,' ipse tunc iterum dixit: Ego firmabo illud.

(398-400)<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> "Lo dì del Sabato santo dapo' tute queste cose predite, quela fedele de Cristo me disse meravelgioxe letizie, le quale avèa avute da Dio. Et infra le altre cose disse a me, frate scriptore, che in quel dì fùe facta in exzeso de mente et stette asai nel sepurchio insieme con Cristo. E disse che in primamente baxiò lo petto de Cristo — e vedèalo che iazea con li ochi zoxo como giacque morto nel sepurchio — e poi li baxò la boca, de la quale dizea che avèa rezevuto amirabile et inenerabilmente delectabile odore, lo quale respirava de la sua boca; mi disse che qui fo questa breve mora" (297).

<sup>53</sup> We read in Karma Lochrie about Margery Kempe: "The medieval antifeminist tradition, consisting of scriptural, exegetical, and literary works, explicitly forbids women from teaching or preaching" (105); "The prescriptions against woman's speech in scriptural and patristic writing are invoked to protect the clerical prerogative to preach" (107); "The most famous scriptural text used to support women's silence is that of St. Paul: 'But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence'" (107).

<sup>54</sup> "E questa fedelle de Cristo respoxe dicendo: Inanzi che tu me dizesti questo, io molte fiате ne pregai Dio che me fazèse sapere se in queste cose, che io àzo dite e le qualle tu ài scritto, fosse alguna parolla de menzona o soperchia, sì che al meno me ne potesse confesare. . . . E poi disse:

*Frater A.* also points out in the conclusion that Angela's spiritual experience was examined by two Friars Minor:

Et etiam, Domino procurante, factum est ut duo alii fratres Minores, familiares praedictae fidelis Christi et vere digni fide, omnia quae scripta sunt viderent et audirent ab ore eius, et omnia examinarent cum ea et pluries cum ea tractarent; et etiam, quod plus est, certi divina gratia redderentur a Domino, quod et verbo et opere fideliter attestantur.

(400)<sup>55</sup>

Yet, the *frater scriptor*, is not satisfied, since he later requests also the certification of higher Church authorities. In the *Testificatio* preceding the text,<sup>56</sup> the friar warns the reader that the writing has been inspected by cardinal Giacomo Colonna together with eight other friars, who considered it divine:

Si cui infrascripta contigerit legere vel videre, quae per quemdam fratrem Minorem fide dignum ex ore cuiusdam famulae Christi diligentissime et studiosissime conscripta fuerunt, certissime noverit quod per dominum Jacobum de Columpna diaconum cardinalem, antequam cum summo pontifice in scandalum incideret, et per octo famosos lectores visa et lecta fuerunt; . . . quorum nullus in aliquo ea redarguit, sed potius humiliter venerantur et tanquam divina carius amplectuntur.

(127-28)<sup>57</sup>

By requesting human approval after having received divine consent and by placing the former at the beginning the text, *Frater A.* makes the institutional authority's seal the most important one. In fact, had Angela not received that official approval, one might wonder whether her words would have survived.<sup>58</sup>

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Io quello suzelaràzo. E conzosiacosaché io non lo intendèse che fosse a dire 'io lo suzelaràzo', esso allora un'altra fiata lo disse: Io lo fermeràzo" (399-401).

<sup>55</sup> "E, procuràndolo Dio, io fizi che due altri frati Minori, familiari de la dita fedelle de Cristo e verazemente degni de fede, tute queste cosse che sono scrite vedèseno et oldisenò da lei, e tute le examinàsemò bene con lei e plui fiate le tratàsemò con lei; et eziandio, ch'è più, per la divina grazia zerti da Dio foronò renduti, le qual cosse testificamò per parolle e per fati" (401).

<sup>56</sup> This *Testificatio* appears only in the codices R (Rieti) and S (Subiaco), and also in the vernacular M (Milano).

<sup>57</sup> Qualunque persona legerà over oldirà queste cosse, le qual per mi, frate Minore indegno, diligentemente furonò scrite secondo che da la boca de la serva de Cristo fono dite conoscerà certissimamente che per mis. Iacomo de la Colona diacono cardinale, inanzi ch'el venise in scandalo con el papa, e per octo famoxi lectori fono vedute e lete . . . niuno in alguna cosa non reprexe, ma più umelmente l'ànno in reverenzia, e come divine cose le tengono e abraziano e si le strengeno e con devoto afecto caramente" (127-29).

<sup>58</sup> After these considerations on the significance of the Church representatives' sanction, Pozzi's

Obviously, despite his desire to make Angela's text remain alive, *Frater A.* places another screen between the reader and the actual voice of Angela. As we have seen, he intervenes, although not always successfully, in the organization of the *Liber*: he summarizes her words, divides the shapeless material, and gives a title to the seven supplementary steps in order not only to transcribe but also to organize Angela's words. Many questions have been raised concerning the text's original language, its time of compilation, and whether *Frater A.* wrote immediately in Latin what Angela dictated in the vernacular. Pozzi remarks on the current view on this subject by undermining it: "Quasi tutti gli studiosi sono dell'opinione che il frate traducesse lì per lì in latino le frasi da lei dette in volgare. . . . È ipotesi insostenibile" (*Il libro dell'esperienza* 89). According to the Franciscan scholar, therefore, the friar wrote in the vernacular and only later did he translate. Either hypothesis undermines Angela's presence and emphasizes the scribe's role.

A close analysis of the text reveals that the function of the friar is not limited to that of the "faithful scribe," as most critics define him. It is the friar who starts and ends the narration in the first person. In the Prologue that follows the *Testificatio*, he first introduces the subject-matter, before referring to Angela as one of God's believers ("aliquam suorum fidelium" 128-30).<sup>59</sup> He then introduces Angela by using the singular "praedicta fidelis Christi" (130),<sup>60</sup> but only after having presented himself as "ego indignus scriptor." It is interesting to notice that Angela is never addressed with her first name, not even with her initials: she is always referred to as "fidelis Christi." If on the one hand the erasing and obliteration of her name may emphasize her inner rather than outward life, on the other hand it does not allow the reader to see Angela as an individual and consequently the narrator of her own experiences.

The name of the friar has also been the object of much discussion. The abbreviation *Frater A.* is found only once in the codex of Subiaco; yet this single mention has opened the door to numerous readings: *frate Amato*, *frate Adamo*, *Arnoldo* and *Arnolfo* (Calufetti and Thier 42n1). Currently the most accepted decodification is "frater Arnaldus," although Pozzi takes exception: "la sigla A. [è] sciolta tradizionalmente in Arnaldo senza alcuna prova documentaria" (16). Consequently, as we have already observed, indeterminacy prevails in the *Liber*.

Ultimately, in spite of the indeterminacy of his name, the friar, rather than Angela, emerges as the real "narrator." Even though on several occasions he

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statement on the absence of intervention of the Church and clergy in Angela's experience seems quite inappropriate: "Quasi nulla la funzione intermediaia del clero e della chiesa: oltre al *sottomesso trascrittore* [my emphasis], si muovono intorno a lei alcuni frati minori in figura prevalentemente di discepoli" (22).

<sup>59</sup> "alcuna de le suo fedele" (129).

<sup>60</sup> "la dita fedelle de Cristo" (131).



modestly introduces himself as “ego indignus scriptor” (Prologus 130), or “ego frater, qui indignus scripsi” (156; etc.), he nonetheless forcefully presents himself in the first person: “Ego frater scriptor” (134; 159). In fact, despite his desire to show his function as secondary and subservient to that of Angela, it is Fra A. who forces her to speak after her first ecstasy in Assisi: “post parvum tempus postquam ego illam coegeram ad dicendum” (166).<sup>61</sup> In order to determine the soundness and authenticity of her revelations, he also shows an immediate concern to have them certified: “Et consului et coegi eam quod totum diceret mihi et quod ego volebam illud scribere omnino, ut possem consulere super illo aliquem sapientem et spiritualem virum qui nunquam eam cognosceret” (170).<sup>62</sup> Lachance underlines the active role of *Frater A.* in the account of the mystical experience through his questioning, urging for clarity, and sometimes reproaching the penitent and quoting the Scriptures: “Arnaldo’s faithful and demanding *masculine presence* [my emphasis] thus served as a significant catalyst in Angela’s development” (121). Thus, *Frater A.*’s function is not only that of the obedient compiler, but also that of the persistent questioner, almost assuming the role of an inquisitor.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to the relationship between the male “scribe” and the female “dictator,” the critics’ attention has also been focussed on the reliability of *Frater A.* in writing Angela’s words. The critics’ trust in *Frater A.*’s transcription may have been encouraged by his insistence that he only wrote what he heard from the penitent: “Et ego nolebam unam dictionem plus scribere nisi sicut ipsa loquebatur, immo et plura dimittebam quae non poteram scribere” (134).<sup>64</sup> Yet, it is precisely such an insistence that should arouse the reader’s suspicion. We have, in fact, already seen that his position is not always submissive, in spite of his protestations of humility.<sup>65</sup>

Some contradictions, however, belie the scribe’s repeated trustworthiness. In two different occasions he writes that the *fidelis Christi* spoke in the first person, although he sometimes translated it into the third person. The use of the third person, however, is limited to his interventions, and consequently seems the result of a subsequent re-writing more than the product of haste: “Et illud quod

<sup>61</sup> “dapoi che quello a dire l’èbi constreta” (167).

<sup>62</sup> “E pregàila che tuto me dizèse, ch’io al tuto lo voleva scriver e averne conseio da alcuno savio et spiritual omo lo qual mai lei non congnochèse” (171).

<sup>63</sup> Pozzi alludes to this kind of relationship between inquisitor and scrutinized: “accanto al veggente c’è l’inquisitore, benigno o maligno che sia, creduto o scettico, che vuol verificare, e per verificare ricorre a schemi collaudati; che lo spirituale medesimo non ignora le teorie e non è detto che non si assuma il compito di verifica man mano che si svolge la storia” (*Il libro dell’esperienza* 87).

<sup>64</sup> “E io non voleva una adizione più scrivere como essa parlava, anzi più cose lasai che scriver non le poteva” (135).

<sup>65</sup> The profession of humility was a topos in the Middle Ages (*A History of Women* 444; Curtius 407-13).

ego scripsi in tertia persona, ipsa dicebat semper, loquendo de se, in prima persona, sed accidebat mihi quod ego scribebam in tertia persona propter festinationem et adhuc non correxi illud" (172);<sup>66</sup> and at the end of the *Memoriale* he reiterates the same words (400). He also states that he always wrote at the presence of the *fidelis Christi* (172; 400). We know, however, that for some time he was prevented from speaking to Angela and that he was replaced by a young boy. Furthermore, in his conclusion he maintains that two friars, who had never been mentioned before, had also been witnesses of her experience (400).

Despite these textual contradictions, scholars seem to have neglected the intrusive role of the friar: Calufetti and Thier describe him as "il paziente e oggettivo redattore" (35), and Lachance expresses a similar opinion: "Thanks to Arnaldo, then, and his scrupulous concern to report Angela's spiritual journey as faithfully as possible, even if it doesn't contain all the richness of her experience, we have in the *Memorial* a text which merits great trust" (120). As far as the text's language is concerned, Pozzi goes even further by maintaining that the *frater scriptor*, as well translators and editors, have not corrupted the freshness of Angela's voice: "Pur se martoriata da traduzioni, ritraduzioni, parafrasi, commenti, la parola di Angela arriva vivente alle nostre orecchie [my emphasis]: disadorna, nuda, aspra, talora dolcissima" (Pozzi 53).

How is it possible that Angela's voice is still alive if the only words we know of Angela are the words attributed to her, words filtered through the filter of male discourse?

#### 4.3. *Angela's Voice: Language of the Body.*

This long analysis has been necessary in order to uncover and bring to light Angela's voice. The confusion and uncertainty concerning the codices and the titles of the text, the biographers' determination to give a chronological order to the "unstructured" account of Angela's life, the pattern she has been forced to follow in order to be allowed to speak, and finally the friar's intervention show to which extent the reader is removed from her voice.

The question of Angela's voice and language is further complicated by the difficulty inherent in conveying mystical experiences, since the literary signs do not correspond to the mystic's contemplation. Angela proclaims no fewer than fifty-one times that she cannot describe in words what she experiences: "et tanta fuerunt haec et talia, quod non possem ea de cetero dicere et verba possum referre parum, sed et dulcedinem et delectationem non possem referre" (188).<sup>67</sup> Later on

<sup>66</sup> "E quello ch'io da lei scripsi como de terza pesona, senpre essa diceva in prima persona parlando, ma adivenivame ch'io lo scriveva in terza persona per la freza, e ancora no lo coressi" (173).

<sup>67</sup> "e tante furono queste e altre cose che mai non le poria dire, e de le parolle poco posso dizere, ma la dolceza e la conolazione non posso narare" (189).

she expands this inability to include all human beings: "Et faciebat me intelligere tunc quod Filius suus erat in altari iam, quasi diceret mihi nova de maxima laetitia, tanta quod nescio eam dicere nec credo quod sit aliquis qui posset eam dicere; immo mirata sum postea quomodo potueram stare in pedibus dum habebam tantam laetitiam" (226).<sup>68</sup> The term often used to render the divine ineffability is "unam plenitudinem inenarrabilem" (252), or "Dei potentiam inenarrabilem" (282).

Sometimes she also shows a certain reticence: "et anima mea videbat plus de passione sua quam ego volo dicere, immo volo illud tacere" (292).<sup>69</sup> She does not want to tell those who cannot understand anything more, but she urges them to believe: "Qui non intelligit credat, quia ego nolo plus dicere" (294).<sup>70</sup> Finally, after having received God's seal, she admits that she has left many things out: "Et dixit quod ego temperate dixeram, quia multa ipse dixit mihi quae ego potui dicere ad scribendum, et non dixi" (398).<sup>71</sup>

Angela's protestations about her inability of putting into words her visions, in fact, interfere with the narrative, making the reader wonder about the authenticity of what s/he is reading. This "uneasiness" towards the credibility of the text is reinforced by *Frater A.*, who shows his frustration in recording Angela's revelations. On a number of occasions he admits that he was unable to transcribe everything, at times because of haste ("Ego frater scriptor istam longam et pulchram praedicationem et doctrinam divinam detruncavi et abbreviavi propter festinationem quia erat multum longa" 234-36),<sup>72</sup> and at times because of his own inability to understand Angela's words: "Hic ego frater scriptor audiebam mirabilia de mundo, et aliquid intelligebam in illo tunc quando ipsa dicebat. Sed nec ipsa poterat explicare, quamvis daret mihi intelligere aliquid per illa quae dicebat, nec ego etiam illa capere poteram ad scribendum" (368).<sup>73</sup> In addition to his omissions, even what he writes is often a reduction of her original words. He reports that when he reads back his writing to Angela she either does not recognize her own words or she complains about the *siccitas* and lack of *sapor* of the language:

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68 "E fazèame intendere allora ch'el suo Fiollo za era ne lo altaro, quaxi me dizesse novella de grandissima letizia, tanta ch'io non lo sazo dizere, nì credo ch'el sia omo che lo potesse dizere; anzi dapoì mi sono meravelgiato come potria star in piede e mentre avèa tanta letizia" (227).

69 "e l'anima mia vedeva più de la passione sua ch'io volgio dire, anzi lo volgio tazere" (293).

70 "Quelo che non lo intendèse creda, imperzioché non ne volgio più dire" (295).

71 "E diseme ch'io tenperatamente avèa dito, imperzoché esso molte cosse me disse le qualle io aveva potuto dizere e non le dissi" (399).

72 "E, io, frate scriptore, in questa bella e longa predicatione e divina doctrina mozaì et abreveai per la freza, inperziò ch'era molto longa" (235).

73 "E qui io, frate scriptore, udiva che diceva le pluì meravelgioxe cose del mondo; e quando essa le dicea, io ne intendeva alguna cosa. Ma essa non lo poteva explicare, avegnaché ne daesse at intendere alguna cosa per quello che dicea, né io a scrivere prendere lo potea" (369).



Et hic potest aliququaliter patere quod ego poteram capere de verbis divinis nisi magis grossa, quia aliquando, dum ego scribebam recte sicut a suo ore capere poteram, relegenti sibi illa quae scripseram ut ipsa alia diceret ad scribendum, dixit mihi admirando quod non recognoscebat illa. Et alia vice quand ego relegebam ei ut ipsa videret si ego bene scripseram, et ipsa respondit, quid ego sicce et sine omni sapore loquebar; et admirabatur de hoc.

(172)<sup>74</sup>

His own poor transcription seems to be a real concern for the friar, who further on in the text repeats almost the same words.<sup>75</sup> He is aware that he has sifted her revelations like flour through the sieve of his writing, thus collecting the dregs and leaving out the essence: "De quibus in veritate ita parum capere poteram ad scribendum, quod ego cogitavi et intellexi quod eram sicut cribrum vel setaccia quae subtilem et preciosam farinam non retinet, sed retinet magis grossam" (170).<sup>76</sup> The marvelous, the refined and precious parts have been lost and only what is coarse has been kept.

Both Angela and *Frater A.* complain about the inexpressibility of her mystical experiences: Angela's verbal expression is likened to a blasphemy, while the scribe's translation obscures the mysteries of her spiritual journey. Can we still say with Pozzi that Angela's voice still reaches us in its originality? And how can we distinguish Angela's voice from *Frater A.*'s voice? Is female language the same as male language?

According to most feminists, women do not have a language of their own yet. In *Speculum of the Other Woman* Irigaray maintains that woman is bound by two choices: she can either remain silent, uttering an indecipherable babble, or act out the specular representation of herself as an inferior male by mimicking male discourse. Some other feminists, however, see other possibilities, other forms of language, even though women have been forced to silence.

According to the Biblical tradition, women are at the origin of language. As

<sup>74</sup> "E qui può in alguno modo apparere, ch'io de le parole divine non poteva prendere se no le plu grosse. Ché alcuna volta, mentre como de la soa boca prendere poteva cusì lo scriveva dretamente, e mentre relegendo quello ch'io avea scripto che altro a scrivere me dizèva meraveiàndose che quele cosse non recognoseva. E l'altra volta, quando io li legea azoché essa vedèse se io avava ben scripto, e essa respoxe che io secamente e senza ogni sapore parlava; e meraveliàvese di questo" (173)

<sup>75</sup> "Haec supradicta ipsa fidelis Christi dicebat mihi fratri scriptori aliis verbis, scilicet pluribus et magis efficacibus et lumine plenis. Unde quando ego relegi sibi, ipsa dixit quod ego non actatum sed e contrario siccum et deactatum scripseram illud, quamvis confirmaverit quod verum scripseram" (222).

<sup>76</sup> "De li quali in veritate cossì poco poteva prendere al descrivere, ch'io me pensai e intixi che io ero come lo crivolo over lo burato, lo qual la preziosa sotille farina non retinne, ma la gnosa" (171)

Dante maintains in *De vulgari eloquentia*, it was Eve who spoke that first human words that caused divine condemnation and disgrace. Because of Eve's boldness, women were deprived of their speech and silenced. Since then the fear of female language has been linked to the fear of female flesh and desire (*A History of Women* 429).

It was the mystics who invented, or rather brought to light, another language, one of gesture: "Female mystics asserted the incompatibility of their language with that of men in a *topos* of modesty, yet they insistently proclaimed their inalienable right to invent a different tongue, one that enlisted the body as sensory support in the creation of a 'total' language whose syntax incorporated shouts, tears, and silence as well as words" (*A History of Women* 433)

Body language has lately drawn the attention of feminists. Hélène Cixous has given a psychoanalytical framework to what she defines *écriture féminine*. She draws from Lacan's theories (who in his turn reworks Freud's theories) to distinguish between a language linked to the Imaginary and a language linked to the Symbolic Order.<sup>77</sup> The Imaginary corresponds to the Freudian pre-Oedipal phase when the child does not consider himself/herself as separate from the mother or from the world. The entering into the Symbolic Order implies the acceptance of the Law of the Father (threat of castration) and the consequent acquisition of language because of newly acquired conception of separation. By prohibiting the child access to the body of the mother, the father breaks the *imaginary* unity of child-mother or child-world. The child shows her/his acquired awareness of separation and difference through language: by saying "I am" s/he admits that s/he has occupied her/his place in the Symbolic Order and abandoned her/his identification with the mother and the world. The Imaginary is thus linked to the female body, while the Symbolic Order is associated with the Law of the Father, which prompts discourse by repression and censorship (otherwise there would be always unity and no need for language). We can draw a parallel between woman and the silence that precedes discourse, on the one hand, and man and speech, on the other. The utterance that is the closest to an imaginary discourse is the pre-Oedipal babble of the child.

In her *feminine écriture* Cixous embraces Lacan's pre-Oedipal Imaginary phase where difference is cancelled in a pre-linguistic unity of child and mother. Thus, the speaking/writing woman occupies a space outside time, a place without naming and syntax. Consequently, while men's language is rational, linear and logical, women's language is a-rational, circular and contra-logical (Warhol 331).<sup>78</sup> Feminine writing, however, is not limited to biologically sexed

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<sup>77</sup> In some ways the Imaginary and the Symbolic Order correspond to Freud's pleasure and reality principle, respectively.

<sup>78</sup> In "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous both theorizes and gives a good example of feminine language. It is a language whose source is the Good Mother, the figure that dominates the imagination of the pre-Oedipal child. In Cixous' metaphorical and poetical language: "There is

females, since Cixous gives as an example of feminine writings that of Jean Genet

Feminists have also tried to deconstruct the opposition between mind and body. Since women have always been associated more with the body than with the mind, they had no access to writing. This traditional notion has been attacked in two ways. First of all, feminist scholars have celebrated women's association with the body and refused the supremacy of mind over body. Furthermore, they have rejected the separation between body and mind and have tried to show that writing is not merely a mental activity. This concept is apparent in Cixous's words about woman writers: "She physically materializes what she is thinking, she signifies it with her body" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 251).

The language "theorized" by Cixous seems to correspond to that of women mystics (but also of some men), who defied the Symbolic Order and its rational language through trembling limbs, cries, tears, and falling on the ground. Since women had been excluded from both the oral and written language of the Church, this kind of language was their only means of escape and expression.

In this light we can reconsider Angela's protestations about the inexpressibility of her experiences as an encouragement towards the production of another kind of language: a language of gesture that enables the mystic to convey the marvelous that words cannot express.<sup>79</sup> This new language characterizes mystics, since those who are closer to God feel less able than others to communicate their experience of God, as we read in Angela's *Liber*: "Quando anima cognoscit quod est hospitata Peregrinum, venit in tantam cognitionem bonitatis Dei et infinitae bonitatis divinae, quod quando fui reducta in me, cognovi certissime quod illi qui magis sentiunt de Deo, minus possunt loqui de eo; quia eo ipso quod sentiunt de illo infinito et indicibili, de eo minus loqui possunt" (322).<sup>80</sup>

Angela often considers the words that she utters as blasphemous: "Videtur mihi blasphemare quidquid dico";<sup>81</sup> at one time, after having reiterated the same term, she loses consciousness and consequently her speech, almost as a sign of the inadequacy of her words: "Videtur mihi blasphemare. Et quando quaesivisti si

always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white milk." Two recurrent metaphors are: "the free-floating sea of the womb and the enveloping sensuousness of the mother's breast".

<sup>79</sup> Even though Karma Lochrie, in her article "The Language of Transgression," expresses this idea, my thesis takes other directions. In her desire to see in female mysticism "an articulation of the feminine that is powerful and enabling" (115), Lochrie completely disregards the role of the male scribe.

<sup>80</sup> "Quando l'anima cognose che àe albergato lo Pelegrino viene in tanto cognoscimento de la bontà de Dio infinito, che quando tornai in me, cognobi zertissimamente che quelli che plui sènteno de Dio, meno ne possono dire; imperzioché, per essa ragione che sènteno de quello infinito e indizibile bene, de lui possono meno parlare" (323).

<sup>81</sup> "Parme de biastemare in ziò ch'io dico."



trahit plus quam hactenus, <quod ita respondi> vedetur mihi quod sit blasphemare. Unde tota infirmata fui modo quando tu dixisti et ego illo modo ita respondi" (360).<sup>82</sup> Angela has thus learnt another language, a body language, through which she manifests the insufficiency of the verbal sign. Such an impossibility to describe her experiences through oral language is reinforced by the forceful image of the tongue being cut off: "Sed ista dicendo, quando recordabar illum de quo decebam vel cui dicebam, statim non poteram plus loqui sed detruncabatur lingua" (364).<sup>83</sup>

Angela first manifests her experience of unity with God not through rational language, but through her emotions. It is through *Frater A.*'s voice that we first hear about Angela's shouting and screaming at the entrance of the church of St. Francis in Assisi. Her screaming and shouting are at the origin of the *Liber*, since it is, in fact, the "explanation" of her "strange" behaviour that prompts *Frater A.* to write. At first he fails to understand Angela's language, and his first reaction reveals bewilderment and shame. In fact he forbids her to return to that church:

Causa vero vel ratio quare incoepi scribere fuit ex parte mea ista, videlicet quia praedicta persona fidelis Christi quadam vice venerat Assisium ad Sanctum Franciscum, ubi ego morabar conventualis, et striderat multum sedens in introitu ostii ecclesiae. De quo facto ego, qui eram suus confessor et consanguineus et etiam consiliarius praecipuus et singularis, fui multum verecundatus maxime pro pluribus fratribus qui venerant illuc ad vedendum illam stridentem vel vociferantem et cognoscebant me et illam. . . . tanta tamen fuit superbia et superba verecundia mea, quod prae verecundia non accessi usque ad eam, sed cum verecundia et indignatione expectavi eam vociferantem aliquantulum e longinquo ab ea. Et etiam postquam destitit ab illo stridoris clamore et surrexit de illo ostio et venit ad me, vix potui pacifice sibi loqui. Et dixi sibi quod nunquam de cetero iterum auderet venire Assisium, ex quo hoc malum accidebat ei, et dixi sociis eius quod nunquam ducerent eam.

(168-70)<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82</sup> "Parme de biastemare. e quand me ademandasti se trae più, che io cusì respuxi, che me pareva de biastemare. Onde fui tuta infermata mo' quando tu lo dizesti e io in quel modo te respuxi" (361).

<sup>83</sup> "Ma questo dizendo, quando me recordava quello de cui diceva, incontenanti me se troncava la lengua e non poteva più parllare" (365).

<sup>84</sup> "Ma la caxione over raxione che io lo comenzai a scrivere, da la parte mia fo questa. Imperzioché la predita fedel de Cristo una fiata era venuta a la zità d'Asixii a San Franzesco, ove io era conventuale, e sedendo mne l'usio de la chieuxia, aveva cridado molto. de la qual cossa io, che ièra suo confesore e parente e conselgiere spiziale, molto me ne vergognai, masimamente perché molti frati erano venuti a vedere stridere e cradare essa, e congnosevano me et essa. . . . tanto tuttavia fo la mia superbia e vergogna, ch'io non andai fino a essa, ma con indignazione e vergogna aspetai mentre ch'ela cridava, stando un poco da lonzi da lei. E poi che essa lasò quello

It is only when she "translates" her experience into words, however imperfectly, that the friar perceives their meaning. Angela narrates how, on her second entering the church of St. Francis, her shouting was caused by the departure of the Holy Spirit, who had taken possession of her during her journey to Assisi, as she had been forewarned:

Et tunc discessum coepi stridere alta voce vel vociferari, et sine aliqua verecundia stridebam et clamabam dicendo hoc verbum scilicet: Amor non cognitus, et quare me dimittis? Sed non poteram vel non dicebam plus nisi quod clamabam sine verecundia praedictum verbum scilicet: Amor non cognitus, et quare et quare et quare? Tamen praedictum verbum ita intercludebatur a voce quod non intelligebatur verbum. . . . et tunc omnes compagine meae disiungebantur.

(184)<sup>85</sup>

Angela's efforts to utter words of hopelessness for the Holy Spirit's departure are overwhelmed by her cries. Her whole body participates in her suffering. Thus Angela's body becomes the vehicle through which she manifests her experiences.

Besides a deathlike numbness, paralysis, obscured vision, and aphasia, the language of the body speaks through a strong reliance on the senses. Throughout the text we find examples of visions conveyed not only through sight, but also through hearing, taste, touch, and smell. The third supplementary step offers an example of a revelation received through hearing. *Frater A.* writes: "Tertius passus est revelatio divinae eruditionis per documenta auribus corporis perceptibilia et per documenta solo gustu mentis intelligenda" (162).<sup>86</sup>

It is, however, the desire to touch the body of Christ that better characterizes women mystics. During the first twenty steps Angela recollects that instance when she was called by Christ to touch His side with her mouth:

Quartodecimo, dum stare ad orationem, Christus ostendit se mihi vigilanti in cruce magis clarum; hoc est quod dedit mihi maiorem cognitionem de eo. Et tunc vocavit me et dixit mihi quod ego ponerem os meum in plagam lateris sui, et videbatur mihi quod ego viderem et biberem sanguinem eius

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stridore e gridare, levòxe de quello usio, venne a me, e apena li puti' pazificamente parlare. E dissili che zamai più non fosse ardata de venire Asixii, dapoi che questo male l'intraveniva; e poi dissi a le compagne che mai non ze la menàseno" (169-170).

<sup>85</sup> "E allora dapò lo dipartimento comenzai a cridare e stridere, e senza vergogna strideva e cridava dicendo questa parola: Amor non cognosciuto, perché me lasi? Ma non poteva over non dizeva più se non che io cridava senza vergogna la dita parolla, zioè: Amor non cognosuto e perché, perché e perché? Ma la dita parolla così s'introduzeva de la voze, che non se poteva intendere. . . . et allora tute le mie compagine se desgiongivano (185).

<sup>86</sup> "Lo terzo passo è la rivelazione de l'amaistramento divino per insegnamenti percepibili con le orecchie del corpo e intendevoli per solo gusto de la mente" (163).

fluentem recenter ex latere suo, et dabatur mihi intelligere quod in isto mundaret me. Et hic incoepi et habui laetitiam magnam, quamvis ex consideratione passionis haberem tristitiam. (142-44)<sup>87</sup>

Here the affective participation in Christ's passion is shown through a complete identification of the mystic with the body of Christ.

Within the context of thirteenth century's development of piety, Christians sought to attain union with God not so much through isolation from the world, but through the practice of *imitatio Christi*.<sup>88</sup> The imitation of Christ, especially Christ's suffering, could assume several forms, some of which were self-generated (such as fasting and self-flagellation), while others were viewed as involuntary, like bodily effusions, stigmata, and tears; finally, some forms included charity to the poor and the sick (Lochrie 117). It seems that women adopted mainly the second and third types. Accordingly, the emphasis on the physicality of the suffering Christ became characteristic of female spirituality. The *imitatio Christi* became very appropriate to the female mystic because of women's traditional association with the flesh.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, however, women succeeded in exploiting such a practice in order to speak up and thus enter the social sphere.

In Angela's case the practice of the *imitatio Christi* through the language of the body gave her the opportunity to make her "voice" heard, even though under layers of patriarchal voices. As we have seen, in order to acquire a voice, Angela had to appropriate a male subtext, consisting mainly of biblical references and saints' legends. In the end she was heard. Religious and lay people became her followers during her lifetime, she has been venerated as a blessed, and, although her voice was filtered through that of her male scribe, her writings have reached us.

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<sup>87</sup> "Nel quartodezimo paso, mentre che stava in orazione, Cristo me se mostrò ne la croxe più chiaro. E disse ch'io ponèse la mia boca ne la sua piaga del costato, e parèvami ch'io vedèse sangue che nuovamente transcoreva dal suo lato, e dàvamese at intendere che in questo me mondava. E qui comenzai ad aver gran letizia, avegnaché considerando la passione avèse tristizia" (143-145).

<sup>88</sup> For a general treatment of the notion, development, and practice of *imitatio Christi*, see the entry "Imitation du Christ" in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*.

<sup>89</sup> Lochrie makes interesting remarks on the conception of the body in the Middle Ages and on the distinction between body and flesh.



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## Carnal Metaphors and Mystical Discourse in Angela da Foligno's *Liber*<sup>1</sup>

### I. Critical Overview

In the Middle Ages, Church leaders provided models of behavior for both secular and religious women. The vast amount of literature concerned with the regimens of a chaste and virtuous life argue that woman, through speech, is responsible for sin. As the Genesis creation story states, Eve's initial words transgressed the boundaries established by God. Eve is thus attributed with the origin of human discourse; the power of her speech swayed Adam to sin.<sup>2</sup> Rooted in the tradition, the Church attempted, as Karma Lochrie argues, to "silence, seal, and privatize" the female body.<sup>3</sup> Eve served as the negative model of woman, for through voice she revealed herself as the embodiment of recalcitrant will and unbridled sexuality. Moreover, in the Middle Ages it was

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<sup>1</sup> All Latin quotes are taken from Thier and Calufetti's critical edition, *Il Libro della Beata Angela da Foligno*. The two main divisions of the text, the *Memorial* and the *Instructions*, will be referred to hereafter as *M.* and *I.*, followed by the chapter and line numbers. All English citations of Angela's work are taken from Paul Lachance's translation of the *Liber*, and are followed by the appropriate page number.

<sup>2</sup> See Regnier-Boher, "Literary and Mystical Voices": "The first human words were spoken by a woman, in the Garden of Eden; woman is at the origin, the inception, of language. A woman was the first to enter into relations with another human being; only the dialogue between Adam and God, that fundamental contractual exchange, preceded Eve's relation with Adam" (427). Conversely, in *De vulgari eloquentia* (I.IV, 1-3), Dante argues that the first words were spoken by Adam: "According to the Book of Genesis at the beginning, where the Sacred Scriptures speak of the origin of the world, it seems that the first of everyone to speak was a woman. It was the very presumptuous Eve who responded to the devil that interrogated her. . . . Although in the Scriptures one finds that woman spoke first, it is more reasonable to believe that man was the first to speak. It is inconvenient to think that an act so important for mankind would be accomplished by a woman rather than by a man" (translation mine).

<sup>3</sup> See Lochrie's poignant essay, "The Language of Transgression: Body, Flesh, and Word in Mystical Discourse."



commonly believed that woman was easily lured by the desires of the flesh, whereas man, although also tempted by fleshly will, possessed a more powerful faculty of reason and was therefore more inclined to control the senses and cultivate a permanent dichotomy between the flesh and the spirit.<sup>4</sup>

By nature, then, woman was believed to be inferior; child-bearing and the excretion of body fluids such as menstrual blood and milk associated her with nature through birth and decay. According to Galen's theory, which was brought to the West by Arab thinkers and accepted by Christian theologians and philosophers, woman could not even claim her body as her own; she was, after all, merely a deformed male.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to Galen, such theologians as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas relegated women to a subaltern role within the hierarchic structure of the universe. In response to this common view, women conceptualized their own bodies as "deformed" and inherently evil. Hence it is not unusual to find that many medieval women, particularly devotional women, attempted to destroy their bodies, which they considered the most horrific symbols of the profane world. Through their dictations and writings, the problematic of the defiled female body unfolds, ultimately reflecting their desire for disembodiment and self-destruction.

Against the backdrop of Judeo-Christian traditions, which attempted to subdue, silence, and suppress women, arose one of the most lofty and sensual voices of the Middle Ages, that of Angela da Foligno (c. 1248-1309), a Franciscan tertiary who renounced everything and everyone to follow the "poor and naked" Christ. This study links the predominantly negative notions of womanhood to her own perception of the female body as vile and wretched and illustrates Angela's unique discourse in relation to medieval ideals of piety and female sanctity. As God's servant and wife, Angela preached the importance of poverty and "caritas" to her spiritual brothers and sisters. In addition, she exercised excessive rigorism: food-denial, self-loathing, and self-induced maladies were essential to the realization of the mystical union. Visions of lying in the bed of the cross with the crucified Christ inspired her to speak and cry in a public language which removed her from her role as wife and mother and placed her, instead, in her newfound role as *ancilla Christi*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Borresen's discussion of the status of women in medieval theological doctrines in "L'ordine della creazione."

<sup>5</sup> In *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, Galen compares the "imperfect" female body to the more perfect "male" body: "The female is less perfect than the male for one, principal reason — because she is colder. . . . all the parts, then, that men have, women have too, the difference between them lying in only one thing . . . namely, that in women the parts are within, whereas in men they are outside. Consider first whichever ones you please, turn outward, so to speak, and fold double the man's, and you will find them the *same* in both in every respect" (628).

<sup>6</sup> See Petroff's discussion of the roles of women in medieval piety in *Medieval Women's Visionary*

The transformative roles of her body, coupled with images of the sordid and grotesque, signify the continuous process of death and renewal in the body of Christ. Hence Angela not only publicly displays herself as a glutton, cesspool of every corruption and evil, but also as a distorted mirror image of the "poor and naked" Christ. Her vices are so grave that her only recompense is abjection and utter delight in the presence of human decay. Angela attempts to flee what she considers the grotesque female body through self-defilement and self-mortification. Thus we need to ask ourselves if she "elevated" and glorified her physicality, as Bynum argues,<sup>7</sup> or rather if she transported her body to the depths of abjection to then shed the burden of the flesh. Indeed we shall observe how the problematic of the female body frames the discourse Angela ultimately unfolds.

## II. Silence and Utterance

In the *Liber*, speech has an ambivalent function: obviously it is a means to express thoughts, emotions and visions, but it cannot express the ineffable and unnameable Subject/Object of the mystical experience. Hence silence becomes the vehicle of communication and knowledge as Angela participates in the spiritual nuptials. When she returns to physical reality, her discourse is marked by carnal imagery and body metaphors, by the sensual and the sensorial. Thus the unspeakable is described in terms of a physical, concrete reality.

Although Angela claims that God so inspired and commanded her to tell her story, she discovers that her words are blasphemous. In addition, she questions the veracity of her speech: "tantum est plus, quod videtur mihi nihil dicere vel male dicere. . . . Videtur mihi blasphemare quidquid dico" (M., II.74-76).<sup>8</sup>

Not only is Angela's discourse blasphemous, but the transcription by her confessor/scribe, Friar Arnaldo, is, as Angela interjects, insipid and inadequate. Her relation to the written word is one of critical resignation. Although Angela, speaking for God, agrees that everything transcribed by Friar Arnaldo is, in essence, true, nevertheless she is quick to point out that his writing is fraught with defects, "written imperfectly" (M., II.155), although without any "falsehood" (M., II.16; Lachance 138). Similarly, she explains that words can

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### Literature.

<sup>7</sup> See Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption*: "Clothing of decay and potential food for worms, female flesh was also an integral component of female person. Created and redeemed by God, it was a means of encounter with him. Healed and elevated by grace, it was destined for glory at the Last Judgment. And in that Judgment it rose as female. Although medieval theologians did not fully understand why, they were convinced that God's creation was more perfect in two sexes than in one" (237).

<sup>8</sup> " . . . I seem to say nothing or to say it badly . . . whatever I say seems blasphemous to me" (Lachance 135).

never qualify the immeasurable and unspeakable. The ecstatic experience itself is mute as both body and voice vanish in the Other-as-God.

Angela's discourse is dressed in oxymorons as it describes the soul in its own obscurity; that is, the soul sees itself as nothing and everything. Reminiscent of Dionysian philosophy,<sup>9</sup> Angela's highly apophatic language, her depiction of an obscure and illuminating vision, is "a secret good, one most certain and hidden, that [she] understand[s] is accompanied with such darkness" (M., IX, 37-38; Lachance 203). Indeed, her "secret" is hers alone. All thought and movement are silenced as the obscurity of the divine mystery unfolds and engulfs her. Her vision is of the Word, which caresses her body and leaves her speechless:

et tunc etiam ostendit mihi Verbum, ita quod modo intelligo quid est Verbum et quid est dicere verbum. Et dixit mihi tunc: Hoc est verbum quod voluit incarnari pro te. Et tunc etiam transitum fecit per me, et totam me tetigit et amplexatus est me.

(I., XXXVI.110-113)<sup>10</sup>

For Angela, silence bears the hidden mystery of the mystical experience. Indeed she cries, "secretum meum mihi" (I., IV.138), for she is not willing, nor can she find, the words to describe her newfound knowledge. We are thus confronted with a paradox: the anomalous, personal union with Christ spurs Angela to both speech and silence.

The struggle with language and the passage into a world of reticence and utter stillness are characteristic of most mystical experiences. Benedetto Croce views this state of contemplation as "muteness," in the negative sense of the term.<sup>11</sup> In addition, psychoanalysts, as Zolla comments, describe mystical experiences as that "which suggest a regression to infancy, to an oceanic phase, to the pleasures of infantile nutrition, to infantile omnipotence, to infantile dependence on omnipotent figures, on ecstatic narcissism."<sup>12</sup> Observed in Angela, however, silence is neither a retreat into "infantile reliance" on an Other-as-God, nor is it a state of aphasia. Rather, the silence of the *unio mystica* becomes for Angela the most lofty form of wisdom as the body loses at once every sense and every member.

<sup>9</sup> For a comparison of the Pseudo-Dionysian's apophatic theology with Angela's own descriptions of "non-amore" and the absence of light, consult Calufetti's *Angela da Foligno* 67 and 93, and Pozzi's *Il libro dell'esperienza* 184-92.

<sup>10</sup> "Then God showed me the Word, so that now I would understand what is meant by the Word and what it is to speak the Word. And he said to me: 'This is the word who wished to incarnate himself for you.' At that very moment the Word came to me and went all through me, touched all of me, and embraced me" (Lachance 315).

<sup>11</sup> Qtd. Baldini 15. Translation mine.

<sup>12</sup> Qtd. Baldini 15. Translation mine.



## II. The Language of the Body

In *Desire and Language*, Roland Barthes depicts language and body in terms of their dichotomy. Language can disguise the truth; the body, instead, is Truth, for "I can do everything with my language, *but not with my body*. What I hide by my language, my body utters" (Barthes 44). Similarly, what Angela's discourse cannot verbally express finds release in a body which bespeaks its state of abjection, pain, and disjunction. Through passion and communion, suffering and eating, the body not only incorporates the divine, but also undergoes a metamorphosis. As Piero Camporesi writes,

By turning into flesh and blood, the primary substances — bread and wine — changed radically in essence, but their physical attributes survived their metamorphosis. The sacrifice turned the inanimate into the animate. The life of the heavenly enzyme, the Incorruptible, fermented out of unleavened bread. Vital, vivifying, beatifying food was born out of dead food. God had introduced himself into a balsamic "mysterious food" in order to modify and remold those who ate and digested it, without being modified Himself.

(Camporesi 226)

Indeed, through the consumption of the Eucharist, Angela's body has been modified and reshaped; it is now able to enter the realm of language, and fuse voice with body. It is here, in her newfound spiritual reality, that Angela expresses the nature of her spiritual nuptials. She has stripped herself of her old garments, and has exposed her new body, a body which willingly speaks the language of eros. In the language of mysticism, the Christian division of love into agape and eros is no longer assumed. Similarly, Angela's language reconstructs and renews her body. She now fully delights in God and in her own physicality. Body and soul are harmoniously re-united, as are eros and agape.

It is useful to observe with Julia Kristeva how mystical language is achieved at precisely the point in which the transient body is destroyed, or fades away: "the obliteration of the body and of the body's image are nevertheless hypostatized in Christ, and this leads to the abolition of the self (of the body-self) and at the same time to its renewal within the Subject" (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 145). Indeed, death and renewal are the recurrent motifs of mystical discourse as the mystic attempts to write the Other:

A subtle machinery for idealization rather than repression is the precise meaning of the term, agape-passion turns into the erotic unleashing of the death drive only when a narrator -- an I -- takes it upon himself to recompose the writing of the Universal Subject and join his own name to the Name of the Father.

(Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 144)

The mystic is renewed in the “universal Subject” (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 87). The death drive or desire for disembodiment plays a role when Angela fuses her body to Christ’s:

et subito *ego* sentiebam *ipsam* unctionem cum tanta dulcedine qua desiderabam mori et quod mors mea esset cum *omni* tormento corporali. . . . Et volebam ego tunc *et desiderabam* quod totus mundus diceret mihi verecundiam, et quod mors mea fieret cum omni tormento.

(M., IV.96)<sup>13</sup>

Her desire for bodily death is accompanied by visions of both the dying and dead Christ. On the Holy Sabbath, Angela imagines her visit to Christ in his tomb, and it is there that their mystical union is sealed with a “kiss on the mouth”:

stetit in sepulcro simul cum Christo. Et dixit quod osculata fuit primo pectus Christi. . . . et postea osculata est os eius; ex quo ore dicebat quod admirabilem et inenarrabiliter delectabilem odorem acceperat, qui respirabat ex ore eius.

(M., VII.100-104)<sup>14</sup>

Reminiscent of Bernard’s *Sermon on the Song of Songs*, the metaphorical “kiss on the mouth” signifies the human *in* the divine. The pleasant odor which departs from Christ’s parted lips, as the Groom in the Canticles whose “lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh” (Cantic 5.13), awakens Angela’s senses. Christ then embraces her:

et postea posuit maxillam suam super maxillam Christi, et Christus posuit manum suam super aliam maxillam et strinxit eam ad se, et ista fidelis Christi auditit sibi dici ista verba: Antequam iacerem in sepulcro tenui te ita astrictam. Et quamvis ipsa intelligeret et quod Christus diceret praedicta verba, tamen videbat Christum iacentem cum oculis clausis et non moventem labia, sicut quando iacuit mortuus in sepulcro. Et ipsa erat in laetitia maxima inenarrabiliter.

(M., VII.105-111)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> “I felt this unction immediately upon receiving it [the host], and it had such a sweet effect on me that I desired to die and desired my death to be accompanied by all manner of bodily torment. . . . Then I wanted and desired to be vilified by the whole world, and wanted my death to be accompanied with every manner of torment” (Lachance 150).

<sup>14</sup> “. . . she found herself in the sepulcher with Christ. She said she had first of all kissed Christ’s breast — and saw that he lay dead, with his eyes closed — then she kissed his mouth, from which, she added, a delightful fragrance emanated, one impossible to describe” (Lachance 182).

<sup>15</sup> “Afterword, she placed her cheek on Christ’s own and he, in turn, placed his hand on her other cheek, pressing her closely to him. At that moment, Christ’s faithful one heard him telling her: ‘Before I was laid in the sepulcher, I held you this tightly to me.’ Even though she understood that

Although Angela's love for Christ and the cross are inseparable, the problematic of the "defiled, profane" woman haunts her and threatens to deny her the ineffable joy of the "unio mystica." Indeed Angela experiences her fragmented self more fully after her union with Christ:

et videbam in me tunc duas partes, sicut si facta fuisset in me una strata. Et ex una parte totum amorem et omne bonum videbam quod erat a Deo et non a me; et in alia parte videbam me siccam et quod a me non erat aliquod bonum. Et per hoc videbam quod non eram ego quae amabam, . . . sed illud erat solummodo a Deo.

(M., VII.149-154)<sup>16</sup>

Angela is torn in two; she can never experience ineffable joy without limit, unless her fragmented self is mended. Her journey is a discovery of the inward split of her self. Hence the negative spectre of her divided self, the horrific woman who embodies the vile and the putrid, waste itself, must be forever shattered. The absence of love, or to use Angela's own words, "non-amore," which has encaptured her fractured self, can only be replaced if her body and soul are swallowed up by the divine.

#### IV. Mending the Fragmented Body

Angela envisions, imitates, and re-creates the passion of Christ. She recalls his crucifixion, carved in her memory, especially during the Eucharistic sacrament.<sup>17</sup> As she continues along her spiritual journey, she experiences Christ's suffering more intensely. Angela renews both body and soul in Christ's passion; her life is now an imitation of the *liber vitae* or passion of Christ. Her fragmented body is comparable to the broken body of Christ, her inspiration is the Cross, which becomes her "salvation," her "bed," and her "delight" (M., V.96-97). Hence, through memory, Angela knows, tastes and feels God, spiritually and bodily.

Thus to "feel" Christ in her soul, Angela must "know" him in her body. To

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it was Christ telling her this, nonetheless she saw him lying there with eyes closed, lips motionless, exactly as he was when he lay dead in the sepulcher. Her joy was immense and indescribable" (Lachance 182).

<sup>16</sup> "And I saw in myself two sides and it was as if these had been separated by a furrow. On one side I saw fullness of love and every good, which was from God and not from me. On the other side I saw myself as arid and saw that nothing good originated in me. By this I discovered that it was not I who loved — even though I saw myself as total love — but that which loved in me came from God alone" (Lachance 183).

<sup>17</sup> The idea of writing from the book of memory is not uncommon in medieval literature. Angela recounts her experience as engraved in her memory. Dante also claims to copy from his book of memory. See Gellrich's *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages*.



gaze upon the Crucifix and feed the eyes of the body with visual recreations of Christ's passion provoke mutual joy and suffering. Through knowledge of Christ's suffering, she is transformed into his pain. Both the agony and love of the cross are the passageway through which Angela identifies with, assimilates, and becomes the crucified.

Although pain splits the body and soul, it serves as a vehicle of knowledge which transports Angela to Christ and to his suffering. Pain stirs the dichotomous body and soul in Christ's passion. Her fragmented body, each member, is subsumed in the whole, the Body of Christ, for the whole can only exist as the totality of its members. All members of her body, although separate and distinct, are nevertheless interdependent, and the disjunction becomes unification, a harmony of all parts. The soul's passion is true when

anima ita fit unum cum corde et corpore toto, quod anima unum est cum eis.  
(M., VII.315)<sup>18</sup>

Paradoxically, the process of mending the fragmented body and soul, of dissolving the dichotomy between body and spirit, begins with the unbearable, unspeakable pains of the body. For the medieval religious, corporeal pain exposes what is hidden in the mind; suffering releases the voice and reveals the truth of one's sinful past as it attempts to express its separation. We need only look at medieval torture tactics, which were believed to be an effective means to extort the truth. Through pain the unspeakable hidden truths of the divine mystery are revealed to Angela. Although she wishes to express her secrets, she cannot find sufficient words to do so. Hence she attempts to break the boundaries of language which cannot describe the ineffable, unnameable, unspeakable. The language which emerges is redundant and vibrant, marked by metaphors, contradictions, oxymorons and hyperboles, as it struggles within its very limits to return to the realm of the unspoken.

In the *Liber*, Angela's discourse is marked by contradictions and ambiguities. She declares throughout the text that she is the most wretched, she is "nihil et de vili materia creata," in her there is "nullam bonitatem" (M., VII.315),<sup>19</sup> and her "delectamenta erant corporalia et vilia" (M., VII.431).<sup>20</sup> Her repeated cries of self-abomination and deprecation reinforce these beliefs, and serve as the frame for the entire work. Yet, paradoxically she claims that God loves her so much more than any other woman in the valley of Spoleto (M.,

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<sup>18</sup> "[all the members of the body are in harmony with the soul, and] the soul in turn is in such harmony with the heart and with the entire body that it becomes one with them and responds as one for all of them" (Lachance 189).

<sup>19</sup> "nothing, and was created from vile substance," and "he [God] found nothing good in her" (Lachance 165).

<sup>20</sup> "delights were bodily and vile" (Lachance 192).

III.45-46). Through repetition and what appears to be contradiction, then, Angela prepares the reader and/or listener for the paradox of the mystical union with Christ. How could such a "sordid, shameful and profane" creature merge with the sacred? Angela grapples with her own uncertainties. She is the embodiment of human corruption, the most debased of God's creation. The contradiction unfolds: through continuous cries of self-contempt, Angela opens the gateway to her own salvation. As poor, suffering, and helpless, she complements the "poor and naked" Christ. Only through abjection, coupled with visions of hell, and a metaphorical and literal descent into her own sordid and impure self, can she transcend the negative constructions of womanhood to then gain access to her own salvation, the dissolution of her "otherness."

In the *Liber*, visions of the blood of Christ and Angela's own bleeding body are recurring images. For Angela, the loss of body fluids is a positive sign of spiritual growth and nourishment. She thus asks God to make her bleed so that she, too, may feel the pain of the crucifixion. Her desire to expel her body-fluids extends beyond an imitation of Christ's passion. In keeping with medieval notions of womanhood, Angela's sins were seen as bodily and arose from within.<sup>21</sup> Hence in order to rid her body of its own defilement, she must purge herself of the very force which keeps that body alive: blood.

et rogavi Deum quod faceret me totum sanguinem meum propter amorem suum, sicut fecerat ipse pro me, spargere. Et disposui me propter amorem suum quod volebam quod omnia membra mea paterentur mortem, aliam a passione sua, scilicet magis vilem. Et cogitabam et desiderabam quod si poteram invenire qui me occideret, dummodo liceret mihi occidi propter fidem suam vel propter amorem suum, quod ego peterem eum quod faceret mihi istam gratiam, scilicet quod, quia Christus *fuit* crucifixus in ligno, me crucifigeret in una ripa vel in *uno* vilissimo loco vel in una vilissima re. . . .  
(M., I.151-159)<sup>22</sup>

Angela adorns her own personal crucifixion with a vision of the bleeding, open wounds of Christ. She repeatedly places her mouth to his wound, and drinks the blood whose steady flow flushes the impurities from her body and soul. Through mutual transference, Christ offers his blood for her sins and depravity, and she,

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the nature of sin and its relation to woman, see Bynum's poignant study, *Fragmentation and Redemption* 202.

<sup>22</sup> "I then prayed to God to enable me to shed all my blood for love of him just as he had done for me. I was even disposed, because of his love, to wish that all the parts of my body suffer a death not like his, that is, one much more vile. I imagined and desired that if I could find someone who was willing to kill me — provided of course that it was licit to be killed on account of one's faith and love of God — then I would beg him to grant me this grace, namely, that since Christ had been crucified on the wood of the cross, that I be crucified in a gully, or in some very vile place, and by a very vile instrument" (Lachance 128).

in turn, offers her blood in the name of love. Their sacrifices transform Angela into Christ in what becomes a delightful commingling of the sordid and the pure. Through such transference, Angela transcends the negative taboos attached to the female body.

For Angela, "precious blood" is a source of life and death. Visions of the bleeding, dying Christ evoke an ecstatic experience of the divine. Death and rebirth in the blood of Christ restore Angela to a state of purity, a return to the lost paradise of Eden, where silence, bliss, and "unknowing" reign in perfect unison.

Angela's abandoned body mirrors the weakened, suffering body of Christ. More specifically, her visions focus on Christ's open wounds, his broken flesh.

cogitabam de magno dolore quem Christus sustinuit in cruce et cogitabam de clavis illis, *quos ego* audiveram dici quod clavi illi de manibus et pedibus eius carnem portaverun intus in ligno. Et desiderabam videre vel saltem, illud parum de carne Christi quod portaverun clavi in ligno.

(M., III.209-213)<sup>23</sup>

This vivid image of Christ captivates her, his pain causes her to waver on her feet, so that she can no longer stand, but must sit and incline her head on her arms, which she extended on the ground, as Christ showed her his throat and his arms (M., III.215-216). Her sadness is now transformed into unspeakable joy. Christ's throat is the gateway which channels her spiritual appetite to a vision of light which overwhelms her. When she takes communion, the host is transformed into Christ's throat, and fills her with immeasurable delight and desire. Reminiscent of the biblical Song of Songs in which the bride praises her lover's throat "as most sweet," and the groom as "altogether desirable" (Canticle 5.16), Angela rejoices in the splendor and beauty of Christ's *gula*, the fountain and source of eternal life itself. The host is miraculously transformed, once again, from Christ's throat to his eyes,<sup>24</sup> which appeared to Angela as most beautiful and delightful (M., III.248-250). Christ's throat is the passageway to both carnal and spiritual fulfillment. Conversely, Angela's own throat becomes a sign of gluttony and excess: she longs to humiliate herself publicly by tightening a rope around her neck, enclosing the gateway between the external and internal.

<sup>23</sup> "When I was meditating the great suffering which Christ endured on the cross I was considering the nails, which, I had heard it said, had driven a little bit of the flesh of his hands and feet into the wood. And I desired to see at least that small amount of Christ's flesh which the nails had driven into the wood" (Lachance 145).

<sup>24</sup> Pozzi 116: "più difficile interpretare 'collo' o 'gola.' Punto di riferimento dovrebbe essere Cant. 5.16: 'guttur illius suavissimum et totus desiderabilis . . .'; 'occhio' ha un valore universalmente acquisito nel linguaggio religioso, essendo figura corrente della divinità."



et vellem mittere in gulam meam unam litortam et facere me extrasinare per civitates et plateas. . . .

(I., I.46-47)<sup>25</sup>

She thus attempts to direct her desires away from the physical world to then contemplate more fully the divine mystery. She feeds on the Eucharist; her nourishment is God. Indeed she struggles against her recurrent desires to interrupt her prayer for any other food save Christ's body.

Other times Angela would pray rather than eat. Since world denial was a common theme in medieval piety, the refusal to eat was not in the least bit unusual. Angela places food on the level of the external and vile, to be consumed only when Christ so commands. Through food abjection Angela, in the traditions of mystics and heretics alike, finds transcendence. Hence abjection, as Kristeva claims, "becomes the requisite for a reconciliation, in the mind, between the flesh and the law. . . . To set oneself up as evil is to abolish evil in oneself" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 127).

In the throes of her somatic and spiritual experiences Angela breaks all relationships with the physical world. At this point, she attempts to describe her newfound spiritual reality: metaphors of food and visions of banquets and feasts abound in her *Liber*. Her immediate experience of Christ is described in terms of a delicious, savory assimilation. Taste becomes the pathway to salvation. Through food renunciation there arises a reversal of appetite. Hunger for material pleasures is transformed into an insatiable, spiritual appetite. Although hunger may be satisfied in the physical world, it cannot on a spiritual level. Desire for God is all-encompassing, immeasurable, insatiable. Furthermore, Angela's spiritual appetite for union with Christ, her visions of her bathing in his blood, and finally, the wonder and delight she feels as she tastes and eats Christ's flesh, intensify to the point where she is absorbed in her own erotic asceticism. Fully absorbed in Christ's passion, she is transformed and transubstantiated in her glorious, passionate God — a God who awakens her every sense and redeems her "vile" female body.

In sum, abjection, self-hate, mortification, and extreme asceticism awaken Angela's senses and ultimately restore her fragmented body to wholeness. The bifurcation of body and soul dissolves, replaced instead by mystic selflessness. It is precisely during the mystical union that Angela recognizes her own "nothingness" and inconstancy in the presence of the immensity of her God. Although her experience is both tactile and somatic, Angela reviles and encloses her body in an attempt to destroy what she considers its wickedness and worldliness until all distinction is lost, and the otherness of the female body melts in the mystical union with Christ.

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<sup>25</sup> "What I would like to do is to tie a rope around my neck and be dragged through towns and public squares" (Lachance 220).

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## Candied Oranges, Vinegar, and Dawn: The Imagery of Conversion in the Letters of Caterina of Siena\*

Between 1375 and 1380 saint Caterina of Siena, the unschooled artisan woman who became a famous lay preacher and mystic, dictated almost four hundred letters addressed to people from a variety of social classes and positions in the Church. The immediate occasion motivating her sending of letters was usually a practical matter. She advised her correspondents about how they could help advance one of her political or ecclesiastical causes: the crusade to the Holy Land, peace in Italy, the Papacy's return to Rome, or Church reform through the naming of holy rectors and bishops in the Papal states. More profoundly, however, in her letters Caterina took every opportunity to convey central lessons about conversion. Her consistent goal in sending letters was to exhort her various audiences to change their lives and to progress always further along the road to Christ-like perfection. Her *epistolario* was an essential apostolate by which she communicated to others the fruits of her own journey to God.

This article focusses on three letters which convey Caterina's conception of the Christian life during the summer of 1378, a particularly active time in her political work. The letters which concern us are L. 314 to Monna Costanza Soderini, the wife of a leading Florentine Guelph politician; L. 365 to one of Caterina's favorite Sienese disciples, Stefano Maconi; and L. 346 to the newly elected Pope Urban VI in Rome. In these letters Caterina implies that real conversion is a slow process demanding perseverance in states that are both painful and joyful and involving a combination of striving, uncertainty, and hope.<sup>1</sup> By examining how Caterina relayed this general message to three

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<sup>1</sup> L. 365 to Stefano Maconi has been dated May 1378; L. 314 to Monna Costanza Soderini has



different people, we shall discern how she responded to individual needs, situations, and spiritual difficulties.

The three letters will also exemplify the variety of rhetorical strategies which made her correspondence an effective form of apostolic action, especially her creative use of symbolism and allegory. Many of the images that Caterina employed in her letters were conventional in late Medieval and early Renaissance Italian religious discourse. Inspired by Scripture, popular preaching, and devotional art, for example, she repeatedly offered the shedding of Christ's blood as the image of God's infinite love for humanity. Significantly, however, some of Caterina's most interesting imagery was her own invention. She reached into her daily experience and that of her disciples to formulate a series of metaphors which use such mundane things as vinegar and water, the dawn, and a candied orange to communicate her spiritual message. Moreover, as we shall see, her technique of joining contrasting images was particularly well-suited to presenting conversion as an ongoing process not fully completed in this life. The oxymoronic images that she created imply that it is only by accepting the paradoxical nature of the spiritual journey that one can hope to reach its happy end. Finally, the study of these three letters will enable us to make a few remarks about the mind-set of Italian believers and to begin reconstructing something of what Timothy Verdon has recently called the early Renaissance "grammar of assent" (Verdon 9).

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A mystic engaged in the world, Caterina cannot be understood without a glance at the events which formed the context for those letters (Brucker, ch. 6-8; Trexler, ch. 2). In 1376 during the War of the Eight Saints, Pope Gregory XI had placed under interdict Florence and a league of allied Italian cities which included Siena. The war and the interdict continued until Gregory died in late March 1378, a year and a half after returning the Papal court from Avignon to Rome. Gregory's successor, the Italian Pope Urban VI, was elected in early April. A group of French cardinals countered Urban's election and eventually elected a rival Pope, Clement VII. Facing internal troubles of mounting magnitude, Urban sought to end the Florentine war and interdict quickly, which he succeeded in doing during July 1378. Caterina played a significant part in all of these events (Levasti, ch. 8-10; Noffke 32-34). By the winter of 1378 she and

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been dated July 1378; and L. 346 to Pope Urban VI has been dated July-August 1378. The letters are difficult to date with precise accuracy because few of the original letters and few of the letters included in manuscript collections are dated. Scholars such as Fawtier, Denis-Boulet, and Levasti have supplied the dates mentioned here. See Anodal, Getto, and Scott for studies of Catherine's style and thought; Bynum, Leclercq, and Morrison for medieval conversion, McGinn for medieval mysticism.

her *famiglia* of spiritual disciples and friends had already gained substantial experience in public affairs. Inspired by what she believed was a divine call to honor God and help save souls through travel and informal preaching about peace, Church reform, and the Christian life, in the spring of 1376 she had gone from Siena to Florence to speak with government officials about ending their war with the Papacy, and then she had traveled to Avignon to attempt a mediation between Gregory and the Florentines. This first peacemaking venture failed, but Caterina probably had a role in convincing the Pope to move his court from Avignon to Rome. In 1377 Caterina led through the Sienese countryside a preaching mission officially sanctioned by Gregory XI. During the autumn of 1377, exhausted by her apostolic activities, she rested, prayed, and dictated a first draft of her major theological and mystical treatise, *Il dialogo della divina provvidenza*. In the winter of 1378 the Pope's strategy for ending the war with Florence included calling on her to serve again as peacemaker. Caterina resided in Florence for several months, continuing work on the *Dialogo* and laboring through spoken advice, the sending of letters, and apostolic prayer until the peace was finally concluded between the city and Urban VI. Then she probably returned hurriedly to Siena at the onset of the Ciompi revolt in late July. During the late summer and the autumn, news of mounting dissatisfaction with, and rebellion against, Urban VI began to trickle in. In November 1378 Caterina would leave Siena again for the last time, called to Rome by Urban to help counter the Schism. She died on April 29, 1380.

As we shall see, though the three letters studied here are not directly political in content, unlike many others that she sent, they do reflect in a variety of ways Caterina's involvement in the events of 1378. Caterina discusses these circumstances directly or refers to them indirectly because they are forcing her correspondents to face and make difficult decisions that regard their spiritual lives. She employs imagery of war and peace that her friends understand immediately because of their shared experience of the war. In addition, though Caterina's three letters focus on the moral and spiritual issues that she believes her correspondents most need to work on for the salvation of their souls, she foresees political and ecclesiastical consequences to their conversions. In Caterina's view, inner change related to one's love for God always has positive effects on the external world of one's social relations and love for neighbor; conversely, one's service to others manifests the quality of one's relationship with God and helps to perfect it (Scott, "Love of God and Neighbor").

Moreover, these letters present Christian conversion in ways that mirror the optimism, the difficulties, and the joys that Caterina was experiencing in Florence while she was laboring on the peace. The first two of the three letters convey her hopeful state of mind in May and June, when the peace was not settled but was appearing increasingly probable. The third letter addressed to Urban VI was sent from Siena soon after the long-awaited peace had been joyfully concluded, when his difficulties in Rome were not as yet very great, and

Caterina was hopeful about his potential as a Church reformer.

Caterina's confidence in the face of negative circumstances is the attitude which links her peacemaking, her fostering of conversion, and her thinking about the Christian life in general. Florence was caught in an evil war which she was certain God would bring to an end, in part at least through her mediation. Likewise, though she affirms that the difficulties encountered by her correspondents are jeopardizing their salvation and need to be addressed, still, she trusts that genuine conversion is within reach for all people, because such is God's good pleasure. Ordinary lay men and women, as well as Popes, will find that the path to Christ is open to them, if they will but follow the practical guidelines which she sets out in her letters. Caterina's optimism about the ultimately positive outcome of her work as peacemaker and as preacher of conversion is remarkable, given that her goals were far from realized at the time of her sending these letters. The peace process had begun, but the war was not over; and though her disciples were starting to seek God, they were not yet sufficiently converted to her satisfaction. Underlying Caterina's optimism was her sense that the peacemaker who trusts in God can find true joy in working to construct a peace, even though this peace is not yet fully visible. Likewise, the spiritual teacher who is encouraging a recalcitrant disciple to shift perspective more completely from self to Christ can have full confidence in the effectiveness of God's action on the disciple both now and in the future, even though she detects only mediocre results as yet.

More generally, in the summer of 1378 Caterina saw the entire Christian life in a way that paralleled her work as peacemaker and spiritual director: she describes the path to God as a sometimes painful experience of the "not yet" which becomes joyful when the waiting is founded on hope in God. However strong the converted person's desire for God and spiritual perfection may be, she implies, it will remain to some degree unfulfilled on this earth. Though at times God may grant the mystic in training small glimpses of the glory that is to come in heaven, and though genuine changes and real progress do occur in the spiritual life, in practice converted persons find themselves in a variety of places between undesirable and desirable extremes. The Christian's daily existence sets her or him somewhere between sin and virtue, between unbelief and complete faith in divine mercy, between death and the fullness of life, and between disregard for God and a lasting, satisfying union with His infinite love. Among the essential prerequisites to spiritual progress, Caterina says, the soul needs to cultivate a realistic acceptance of this intermediary situation and a hopeful trust that God is working to bring about the desired goal of union with Him through that intermediary situation. For Caterina, the key to persevering in this joyful and painful waiting for God is to focus on Christ and develop the virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Caterina explained her view of the spiritual life most completely throughout her book, the *Dialogo*, which she was thinking about and revising during the



summer of 1378. There she portrays the entire Christian life as a pilgrimage. Having decided to leave sin behind, the pilgrims take union with God the Father as their end. The path of their pilgrimage is Christ Himself, whom Caterina sees also as the Bridge linking God to sinful humanity at the Incarnation and making it possible for humanity to walk back to God, to be repeatedly forgiven its sins, and to be granted eternal salvation. The pilgrim's progress in the journey on the Bridge is fueled by the joyful and patient expectation of something which exists already to a degree, but which has still to be perfected: the very life of Christ within the believer. The letters which Caterina dictated during the summer of 1378 present the Christian life as a pilgrimage too, but there she relies on a variety of imagery better suited to the needs of each letter's recipient.

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The letter to Monna Costanza Soderini (5:24-28) addresses this woman's particular problem, which was the excessive fear of death and damnation caused by despair over the gravity of her sins; and Caterina proposes that she strive instead for the opposite virtues of penance and faith in God's mercy. Using Pauline language to describe what Costanza's full conversion will mean (Col. 3:9-10), Caterina tells her to take off self-love and servile fear, put on Christ crucified, and return to God. Caterina suggests further that Costanza's hope in the divine mercy ought to sustain her not only if her heart finds all worldly things tedious and displeasing and if she truly has put on Christ, that is, if she is already leading a fully converted life. The main point of the letter is that Costanza should also trust God now, in her current imperfect situation between sin and virtue, even if she should happen to die before doing sufficient penance for her sins. Caterina does not mention what particular circumstances caused Costanza's fear of death. However, one assumes that Costanza, whose husband Niccolò Soderini was one of the most important Guelph leaders of Florence, may have had good reason to fear premature or sudden death during the summer of 1378, when the War of the Eight Saints and the difficult peace process were causing many serious political and social upheavals in the city. Caterina wants to reassure Costanza that dying in the intermediate state between sin and perfection would not be a threat to her salvation, so long as she places all her hope in God now.

To make her point Caterina leads Costanza step by step through a confession to God. This is a model prayer meant to teach Costanza how to overcome her temptation of despair and her fear of death by turning with trust to Christ:

Convienici dunque ponere rimedio a tanta malizia del dimonio, e rispondere a sé medesimo a queste cogitazioni che gli vengono, vollendo l'occhio al suo Creatore; e dire: "Io confesso che son mortale; la qual cosa m'è a grandissima grazia, perocché per la morte io giugnerò al mio fine, cioè a

Dio, il quale è la mia vita. Ed anco confesso che la vita mia, con le opere che io ho fatte, non meritano altro che l'inferno. Ma io ho fede e speranza nel mio Creatore e nel sangue del consumato e svenato Agnello, che mi perdonerà li miei peccati, e darammi la sua Grazia. E io m'ingegnerò di correggere la vita mia per lo tempo presente".

(26)

Costanza is caught between the realization that a just God should send her to hell for her sins and the inner conviction that her only goal is the eternal life of union with God in heaven. Given these circumstances, Caterina teaches, Costanza's only option is to stop listening to the demonic voice of despair and to address her Creator. She need to admit her failings to God, to believe in divine forgiveness, to develop faith and hope in Christ's blood, and to attempt to change her life.

In addition to providing a model confession of sin and profession of faith, Caterina gives Costanza advice also about how to imagine and understand properly her current intermediary state between sin and faith. She writes that sin and divine mercy may well continue to coexist in her life, but that this should not be a cause of despair. All of the world's sins are like less than one drop of vinegar in the midst of the sea. Though real and serious, Costanza's sins are insignificant as compared to the infinite magnitude of God's love:

Se tutti li peccati che si possono commettere fossero raunati in una creatura, sono meno che una gocciola d'aceto in mezzo al mare. Or così sono li peccati rispetto della divina misericordia, purché l'anima voglia ritornare a riceverla con vera e santa disposizione, e con dispiacimento della colpa commessa; nel quale dispiacimento perde la tenerezza del corpo suo, e ogni cosa creata.

(26)

Just as the vinegar remains intact in the sea, so sin may not be totally obliterated by divine mercy as of yet. Still, as the soul realizes that the power of God's love is so incommensurably greater than her own sin, she learns how relatively unimportant sin, the flesh, and all created things actually are, and she is eased into conversion and sorrow for her faults. Caterina suggests that it is only by accepting the paradox of being in the intermediary state that includes simultaneously sin, penance, and trust in God's great mercy that one can be comforted and gain the strength to make further progress toward holiness. Caterina concludes this section of the letter with a glowing description of what the soul who is experiencing the ambiguous and difficult state symbolized by the vinegar and sea imagery may expect to become if she remains faithfully in that state:

A questo modo l'anima s'assicura, e cresce lo amore nel Fine suo; e perde il

timore servile della confusione, e diletta con grandissima giocondità col diletto suo Cristo crocifisso, aspettando con grandissima letizia e riposo l'ora della morte. E non tanto che l'aspetti, ma desidera di vedersi levare dal mondo, ed esser con Cristo. Orsù dunque, figliuola mia dolce, non più timore! Ma con letizia passate questo punto del tempo, con uno desiderio della virtù, e con vera pazienza. . . .

(26)

Caterina foresees a future time of further conversion, when Costanza will become confident enough in God to live with inner peace in this place between sin and perfection, and between life and death. From faith and hope, her love for Christ crucified will grow, and the waiting for God will become a delight and a joy. Finally, the soul will begin to yearn for the death that brings her final and complete union with God. Caterina implies that this state of yearning for death and full union with God is as close to perfection as the soul can hope to reach in this life. She challenges her lay female disciple to seek this, the highest level of spiritual attainment possible, through the patient and joyful acceptance of her current danger and her uncertain status between sinner and saint.

The last section of the letter is, appropriately, a eulogy of time as the divine gift that characterizes human life in this world and the soul's struggle in the intermediary state between sin and perfection. Shifting to economic imagery, the author calls time a treasure which should not be buried or wasted, but put to good use for the acquisition of eternal life (27). Caterina ends her letter with a message on the value of time addressed to two people whose identity is uncertain, *la fanciulla* and Monna Nera, and to Costanza's politician husband Niccolò: "E ditegli che sappiano furare il tempo, e spenderlo con vero e santo desiderio, mentre che l'hanno" (28). Caught for now within the contingent and limited confines of time, Caterina implies, her correspondents need both to accept the difficult reality of leading a spiritual life on earth within time, and to nurture their desire for virtue, God, and eternity in heaven.

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Caterina's letter to her close Sienese friend and disciple Stefano Maconi (5:252-57) differs from the letter to Monna Costanza Soderini in the greater frequency, length, and directness of its references to specific personal and public matters. Comments on the war in Tuscany, on ecclesiastical problems, and on details of several people's lives make up the second half of Stefano's letter, whereas only the few lines quoted above from the very end of the letter to Costanza mention specific things and individuals. The more concrete character of Stefano's letter, as compared to Costanza's, might be explained by his deeper involvement in public affairs as a man from a prominent noble family, and by his closer connection to Caterina as a Sienese disciple. Moreover, this is also one of the eight letters by



Caterina whose original manuscript has survived: while we can read in their entirety the words she sent to Stefano, we know Caterina's other letters, like the one to Monna Costanza, only through manuscript collections in which the texts seem to be incomplete. Unfortunately for Caterina scholars, late fourteenth-century editors of her *epistolario* excised many of the end-sections where she had inserted discussions of practical matters, perhaps because they assumed these mundane things would not be spiritually edifying (Noffke 9-13). Having the longer, unexpurgated version of Caterina's letter to Stefano Maconi allows us to see better how she adapted her message to his concrete needs.

Caterina addresses several matters of public concern that affect Stefano's spiritual life. The war between the Florentine League and the Papacy and the effect of the Papal interdict on the Sienese church are central issues in this letter. In particular, she warns Stefano to avoid attending Mass and receiving the sacraments. He had requested her advice about a subterfuge used to circumvent the interdict. The practice involved attaching oneself, theoretically and temporarily, to the household of someone, like a certain Messer Jacomo, who was exempt from the interdict. Caterina responds that such compromises with the truth are wrong. One either serves someone as part of his household, or one does not, and clearly Stefano does not serve Messer Jacomo: "Ché noi sappiamo pure, che, perché io mi faccio titolo d'essere suo fameglio, io pure non sono né voglio essere" (255). Rather than take advantage of an artificial loophole, Caterina says, Stefano and her disciples ought to be humble and obedient, stay away from the sacraments, and wait with patience for the time of peace.

In addition, the letter asks Stefano to take care of several practical matters that concern Caterina's *famiglia* of disciples and friends. She entrusts him, her head disciple in Siena, with a number of messages for other Sienese members of her group. She conveys to him affectionate messages from *famiglia* members who are with her in Florence. She also tells him to look into the status of monies that were sent for a horse, but that never arrived at their destination. And Stefano is to arrange for Caterina's *Libro* (the *Dialogo*) to be sent to her in Florence, so she can revise it.

Beyond these relatively mundane matters, however, the letter focusses on personal problems related to Stefano's family and his religious vocation. Caterina wishes to free Stefano from an excessive attachment to his relatives, whom she calls *nimici domestici* and accuses of seeking only their own self-interest and not what is best for him. In contrast, she recommends detaching from family, letting the dead bury their dead, and following Christ (Luke 9:60). She wants Stefano eventually to take the drastic step of leaving his mother and father in Siena and joining her *famiglia* in Florence to seek God and to work for peace with the Papacy. While she vigorously encourages him to free himself of family ties in order to bind himself solely to Christ, however, she realizes also that leaving Siena immediately would cause a great upheaval, what she calls "scandalo e turbazione del padre e della madre" (255). As a result, Caterina

specifies that he should come to work for public peace with her in Florence only if he can do so personally "in pace" (256): that is, if the scandal ceases, and his parents give him permission to leave. In the meantime, though Stefano is upset by many contradictory thoughts about his familial and vocational choices, he should be content to stay in Siena and he should be comforted in the midst of the waiting and the turmoil.

Stefano's current experience in Siena, according to Caterina, involves several kinds of waiting. Deprived of such objectively salutary consolations as attending Mass and enjoying the company of friends who strengthen him in the spiritual life, he is tempted to seek unethical, quick, and easy remedies to his pain. She wants him to resist the impulse to satisfy his desire for God in inappropriate ways. Instead, he should scrupulously keep the interdict, obey his parents, live with his contradictory thoughts, and find God in the waiting for peace and family approval.

To kindle in Stefano a more mature desire for God, Caterina develops language far more complex than the imagery of the drop of vinegar in the sea used in her letter to Monna Costanza. Here a recent unexpected event in Stefano's life triggered in her a similarly didactic, but more playful and elaborate exegetical response. Caterina was inspired to invent for her correspondent an entirely original meditation linking aspects of his experience to several spiritual meanings. Apparently Stefano had written to Caterina that he was taken prisoner by highway robbers in broad daylight, and then at God's instigation he was miraculously released by these enemies at dawn, at the time between night and day. Caterina clearly relished the allegorical potential of these events. Wishing to render more effective her suggestions about conversion to Christ and the need to wait patiently in Siena for now, Caterina sends Stefano a rich assortment of explanations for what the images of night, day, and dawn might mean.

First Caterina contrasts day and night, and she advises Stefano that night is the best time in which to be. She tells him to protect himself from the enemies of his soul by seeking to remain in the night of true self-knowledge and humility:

Pensaci, dolcissimo figliuolo, che, mentre che tu starai nella notte del vero cognoscimento di te, tu non sarai mai preso: ma se la propria passione volesse passare col dì del proprio sensitivo amore; o l'anima volesse passare prima al dì del cognoscimento di Dio, che alla notte del cognoscimento di sé; sarebbe presa da' nemici suoi.

(253)

Day is associated here with self-love, the giving of priority to physical passions, and spiritual presumption (to focus too early on God's love without the requisite foundation in self-knowledge). These are vices that would lead to Stefano's ultimate downfall, his surrender to the enemies of the soul. In contrast, Caterina

associates the image of night with spiritual safety, achieved through the humble confession and acceptance of one's sinfulness. Just as Stefano was taken prisoner during the day but was safe at night, so to keep moving forward on his journey to God he should treasure a consciousness of the lowly reality of who he is, working at overcoming his sinful tendencies. Significantly, whereas Caterina's letter to Monna Costanza seeks to rescue her from the temptation to despair about her salvation because her sins seem too great and she fears death, the letter to Stefano directs him to beware of the opposite danger, the temptation to believe that he is more advanced than he really is in the path to God.

Next, with a gleeful shift in interpretation, Caterina suggests that the best time in which to be is neither the night of self-knowledge, nor the day, which she now translates as a positive thing, the knowledge of God's goodness. Instead, the time Stefano needs to live in is the dawn, that hopeful prelude to day which contains elements of both night and day but seems less satisfying than either the full night or the full day. In her first interpretation of the dawn, Caterina explains it is a spiritual state including both humility and awareness of God's great love for the soul. To avoid the dangers of presumption and despair, both of which lead to the loss of spiritual freedom, it is necessary to live happily in the intermediary situation between day and night that is symbolized by the dawn:

Or non ha dubbio, che, se l'anima con ansietato e dolce desiderio non sta nel cognoscimento di sé, e della bontà di Dio in sé; e' si troverebbe menato preso [sic] da' nemici di Dio. Subito il nemico della presunzione col legame della superbia, le passioni e le delizie e stati del mondo, il demonio e la carne, tutti ci piglierebbero. E però voglio che sempre tu riposi tra il dì e la notte; cioè cognoscendo te in Dio, e Dio in te.

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The formula "cognoscendo te in Dio, e Dio in te" is one that Catherine repeated often in her correspondence and that Stefano would have recognized and understood well. What she means by this formula and her reference to resting between day and night in the dawn is that Stefano can avoid despair over his own shortcomings and the trials of his spiritual journey by focussing with faith and hope on God's infinite love for him, as manifested in his soul's noble creation in the divine image and likeness, and in his re-creation and redemption in Christ's blood. At the same time Stefano can avoid presumption by realizing how much he needs divine grace, given the radical fact that his own being cannot even exist without God. To hold simultaneously the very great dignity of the soul and the utter nothingness of the soul is the difficult challenge proposed here. Caterina warns that if Stefano ever steps out of this dawn, the enemies of his soul will be victorious over him. To abide in God, he will have to rest "always" in this dawn.

Caterina continues her exegesis of the dawn by suggesting several other



equally important interpretations. To explain that Stefano will be able to overcome his current mental and emotional turmoil only if he first accepts it humbly as God's will, she tells him that living in the dawn means welcoming pain with hope:

Allora troverai, che, se i nemici t'avessino legato, e ingombrato il cuore di molti e vari pensieri, riceverà il cuore l'aurora; saratti detto dentro nell'anima tua, e tu il dirai ancora: "Vatti in pace, e riposati in pace in su la mensa della croce, dove troverai la pace e la quiete, stando nel mare tempestoso". Quanta pace vi fu, quando a voi, agnelli in mezzo di que' lupi, fu detto da loro: andatevi in pace! Essendo anco tra la guerra loro, gustaste la pace, quando l'udiste. E così ti pensa, che, quando l'anima si sente presa con molti e diversi pensieri, ella si conforma colla volontà di Dio. Vedendo con quanto amore egli le 'l concede, e quanto ci fanno venire a più perfetta sollicitudine e vera umiltà; vi trova la pace, essendo ancora nel tempo della guerra.

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Just as Stefano was freed by his wicked captors at the moment of dawn, when a kind of dawn entered their hearts, so he will be freed from his spiritual enemies, the troublesome thoughts and emotions he is suffering at the moment due to his frustrated desire to leave Siena and join Caterina's group in Florence, only when a new kind of dawn enters into his heart. Paradoxically, if he wishes to be freed from his pain he will first have to welcome it as Christ did the cross. He will have to learn that his current suffering of unfulfilled desire is a gift from God's love, and he will have to trust that all that he is undergoing is serving the utterly good purpose of fostering his continuing conversion. More perfect solicitude in the pursuit of holiness and God will be his only if he accepts to rest now in the intermediary position between meaningless pain and complete joy symbolized by the dawn.

This dawn represents a spiritual state that seems initially impossible to sustain, like finding peace while dying on a cross, navigating on a stormy sea, or fighting in the midst of a war. Caterina underlines the difficulty of living in this dawn by her frequent repetition of war and peace language. Because she does not resolve the contrast between the opposites of war and peace through some intermediate word that would contain them both simultaneously (she speaks only of "pace, essendo ancora nel tempo della guerra"), she implies that being in the dawn does involve painful tension, not unlike her own state of patient waiting for the peace to be settled in Florence. Caterina's point, however, is not the value of suffering as an end in itself. Her decision to focus on dawn imagery also conveys a message of hope, since dawn leads inevitably to day in the natural order of things. She is assuring Stefano that by accepting to endure his unfulfilled desire with trust in God he will eventually pass through the pain to greater joy. And just as he was freed by the highway robbers, Caterina promises,

so his soul will be freed from his spiritual enemies, particularly his bothersome thoughts and feelings, and he will find genuine peace and union with God.

Later in the letter Caterina shifts to another one of her goals, to encourage Stefano to detach from family ties and follow Christ more single-mindedly. There the image of dawn takes on a third meaning, which holds the less positive connotation of a temporary state of indecision between the night of unbelief and the bright sunlit day of full conversion. She certainly hopes that eventually he will be able to leave Siena and his relatives, the *nemici domestici*, to lead a more intensive form of the spiritual life with her spiritual *famiglia*. What she wants him to do now, however, is to persevere in the intermediary state between the two types of family he is considering and to be comforted with hope:

Quando tu sarai diliberato da loro, escito fuore di prigione; sarà levato il sole. Ora se' nell'aurora, che anco ben bene non ti lassa gustare né discernere la virtù, perché non se' ancora nel tempo del sole; che tu sia sciolto da questi nemici domestici. Ma io voglio, carissimo figliuolo, che tu ti conforti ora in questo tempo dell'aurora; perché tosto ne verrà il sole, udiremo quella dolce parola: "Lassa i morti seppellire a' morti, e tu mi seguita". Altro non ti dico sopra questo fatto. Annègati nel sangue di Cristo crocifisso, acciò che i nemici non ti trovino più. Or non dormire nel letto della negligenza, e vènti sciogliendo tosto, acciò che meglio ti possa legare.

(254)

The variety of interpretations which Caterina proposes for the image of the dawn as intermediary between day and night allows her to teach her disciple Stefano about the conversion she is expecting him to undergo. She wants him to develop more humility, to balance consciousness of his own sinfulness with trust in God's love, and to resist his tendency to avoid all painful waiting. The acceptance of a series of painful paradoxes with hope in Christ's blood is key to progressing and persevering in the spiritual life. Caterina's allegory of the highway robbers' incident and the various times of day, night, and dawn is meant to help Stefano understand, and grow in his desire for, such a true conversion. Relating her difficult lesson about pain and joy to a recent traumatic event that had a happy ending makes that lesson clearer, easier to remember and meditate on, and more pleasant to practice than would a direct exposition of ascetic and mystical theology. A similar theme and a similar rhetorical strategy characterize the third letter by Caterina considered here, the one to Pope Urban VI.

\* \* \*

The letter to Urban exhorts him also to conversion (5:161-64). He needs to turn away from the perverse pain and bitterness he is experiencing because of adverse circumstances. Caterina mentions without further elaboration a certain "caso

occorso per li malvagi e iniqui uomini amatori di loro medesimi" (164) as the occasion for the Pope's evil bitterness. Caterina opposes indulging in the bitterness that afflicts and dries up the soul and arises from a selfishness without charity, to the bearing of a sweet bitterness that feeds the soul and enables it to suffer with charity for the salvation of others. For Urban conversion will mean overcoming the self-love which underlies his feelings of anger and disappointment at the *caso*, feeling sorrow over his own sins and those of others, and developing a courageous desire to reform the Church despite the persecutions and tribulations such a task will entail.

Caterina informs the Pope that it is God's will for him to become "Christ's vicar" not only in name, but in the reality of his life:

Pare, santissimo Padre, che questa Verità eterna voglia far di voi un altro lui; e sì perché sete vicario suo Cristo in terra, e sì perché nell'amaritudine e nel sostenere vuole che reformiate la dolce Sposa sua e vostra, che tanto tempo è stata impallidita. . . . Ora è venuto il tempo che egli vuole che per voi, suo istrumento, sostenendo le molte pene e persecuzione, ella sia tutta rinnovata. Di questa pena e tribolazione ella n'escirà come fanciulla purissima, tagliatone ogni vecchio e rinovellato nell'uomo nuovo.

(162-63)

Caterina goes on to express her hope that the cause of Urban's pain will be removed; but in the meantime, she advises, he must remember his own nothingness and place his trust exclusively in Christ. Caterina's ideal is a Pope who allows God to make him into "another Christ" with the willingness to suffer for the conversion of a "pallid" Church. The unfortunate reality, however, was that Urban was prone to excesses of anger, what she called in another letter to him (L. 364) "movimenti sùbiti, che la natura vi porge" (5:250). Caterina writes here to foster in him another kind of movement, from natural anger to supernatural charity, and to encourage him to help purify the Church in the "new man" and restore the Church to her original state as a "pure young girl."

Instead of using as the basis for her letter a recent event in the life of her disciple, as she could do more appropriately with someone like Stefano whom she knew well and corresponded with often, in the Pope's case Caterina actually created the object of her allegorizing, a candied orange, and sent it to him with her letter (Levasti 377). Caterina followed a recipe for candied oranges that may have been well-known in the fourteenth century, for it is fairly close to the recipe for *orangat* which her near contemporary, the anonymous middle-aged man who authored the *Mesnagier de Paris*, included in this book to instruct his young wife on how to keep a household and lead a devout life (796-99). One can see how well-suited a recipe was for Caterina's didactic purpose: as a short "how to" set of instructions for transforming simple ingredients into more palatable foods, a recipe was an ideal vehicle for conveying messages about conversion.

Caterina's recipe for candied oranges called for replacing the bitterness of



medieval oranges with edible bitter-sweetness. She implies that one must first scoop out the bitter pulp, then soak and boil the orange peel in water, fill the shell with good things mixed with honey, and finally cover the candied orange with gold:

Siccome alcuna volta io ho veduto che la melarancia, che in sé pare amara e forte, trattone quello che v'è dentro, e mettendola in mollo, l'acqua ne trae l'amaro; poi si riempie con cose confortative, e di fuore si copre d'oro. E dove n'è ito quello amaro che nel suo principio con fadiga se la poneva l'uomo in bocca? Nell'acqua e nel fuoco.

(163)

Next, Caterina interprets the candied orange recipe as an allegory for the steps of the Pope's conversion. As in her other letters, she suggests that Christ's blood will be the sole active agent of Urban's movement from self-love to the many virtues and the spirit of service that characterize true holiness:

Così, santissimo Padre, l'anima che concipe amore alla virtù, nel primo entrare gli pare amaro, perché è anco imperfetta; ma vuolsi ponere il rimedio del sangue di Cristo crocifisso, il quale sangue dà un acqua di Grazia, che ne trae ogni amaritudine della propria sensualità; amaritudine dico afflittiva, come detto è. E perché sangue non è senza fuoco, perocché fu sparto con fuoco d'amore; puossi dire (e così è la verità) che il fuoco e l'acqua ne tragga l'amaro, vuotasi di quella che prima v'era, cioè dell'amore proprio di sé; poi l'ha riempito d'uno conforto di fortezza con vera perseveranza, e con una pazienza intrisa con mèle di profonda umiltà, serrato nel cognoscimento di sé; perché nel tempo dell'amaritudine l'anima meglio conosce sé e la bontà del suo Creatore.

(163-64)

Like the water in which the orange soaks and boils, Christ's blood and its attendant water of grace and fire of divine love will draw all perverse bitterness out of the Pope. In the first stage of conversion, the person who soaks in the divine love symbolized by, and made effective in, Christ's blood is emptied of all that was there "before" (*prima*): the selfish self's attachment to ease, its fear of pain and responsibility, and all that caused its immature and bitter reaction to hardship. In the second stage (*poi*), the Pope will experience more and more fully the pain of his own sinfulness, of life's struggles, and of his difficult apostolate, and he will be filled by God with such objectively comforting and honeyed virtues as fortitude, perseverance, patience, and humility. Just as the candying process does not entirely neutralize the bitterness of the orange, however, so the presence of these sweet virtues in the soul will not remove all the Pope's pain. Rather, by allowing his bitter experience to help him focus better on his own nothingness and God's goodness, he will be enabled to face and bear that pain, whatever it is, with trust in God. Caterina stresses that it is the decision to

accept this bitterness that will be make the Pope's life ultimately sweet. She makes this point forcefully: "Come l'anima ha deliberato in sé di volere sostenere infino alla morte per Cristo crocifisso e per amore della virtù, così [il frutto] diventa dolce" (163).

Caterina ends her exegesis of the recipe by explaining the meaning of the gold wrapping around the orange. Once the Pope is filled with Christ, she says, his virtues will become brightly visible to others, and he will bear much fruit in his apostolate. Urban will manifest gentle humility, purity, charity, and patience far removed from the perverse bitterness with which he began:

Pieno e richiuso questo frutto, apparisce l'oro di fuori, che tiene fasciato ciò che v'è dentro. Questo è l'oro della purità, col lustro dell'affocata carità, il quale esce di fuori, manifestandosi in utilità del prossimo suo con vera pazienza, portando costantemente con mansuetudine cordiale; gustando solo quella dolce amaritudine che doviamo avere, di dolerci dell'offesa di Dio e danno dell'anime. Or così dolcemente produderemo frutto senza la perversa amaritudine. . . E la S.V., e noi matureremo li frutti delle virtù nella memoria del sangue di Cristo crocifisso, con vera umiltà, come detto è; cognoscendo noi non essere, ma l'essere e ogni grazia posta sopra l'essere avere da lui. Così compirete in voi la volontà di Dio, e il desiderio dell'anima mia.

(164)

Caterina's gift of the candied orange is an elaborate representation of what Urban's soul will be like once the divine Cook is finished with him. Though the bitterness of the orange has been alleviated through the soaking in water and the adding of honey, the finished product of the recipe is not pure sweetness, but what she calls a "sweet bitterness." In seeking to be useful to his neighbor by reforming the Church, the converted Urban will surely encounter many bitter difficulties and persecutions. Rather than focus on his old fear of suffering and his anger which "dry up" his soul, however, he will experience now a nurturing kind of bitterness. By recognizing his own lack of being without God, by admitting his own limitations and sins, and by grieving over how much the unreformed Church and the damnation of souls dishonor God, he will develop into a fully mature Christian whose suffering in the apostolate is at once painful, sweet, and fruitful. He will truly become "un altro Cristo."

\* \* \*

To conclude, one may ask what these three letters about conversion tell us about Caterina's religious mentality in the summer of 1378. She assumes that spiritual change is necessary and possible for all kinds of people, including lay women, lay men, and even Popes. Beyond possible differences in ecclesiastical status and gender, for her conversion is always a shift from an evil to a good

which involves divine grace and great human effort. Caterina's role as a spiritual writer is to draw a road map to explain in practice how her various correspondents' difficulties and sins can be overcome, but she also insists that a full shift from evil to good, from self to Christ, or from bitterness to sweetness, cannot be perfectly effected in this life. The soul is placed in a state of tension, of unresolved desire, of yearning and hungering for something that is not yet entirely present. It is essential that the soul be reassured that the waiting for God is not in vain, that the suffering is productive, that change is occurring, and that what is not yet entirely present will surely come.

The means by which Caterina seeks to communicate this message effectively is imagery and allegory. The sweet bitterness of the orange, dawn between night and day, peace in the midst of war, the vinegar in the sea — these images which mix together and juxtapose opposites suggest that though living in that state of unresolved desire is not easy, the path to God makes sense and can be traveled with a certain kind of joy. Significantly, Caterina does not claim to have received these images through supernatural visions; neither does she base them primarily on Scriptural or other literary models. Rather, in drawing her allegories from ordinary life, current events, and her imagination and in giving them profound religious meanings, she endows simple things, the paradoxes of human existence, and her own creativity with very great dignity.

Caterina's particular way of linking this world to God is part of what makes her an early Renaissance writer and mystic. For her the ultimate goal of human life is entirely otherworldly, and God can be reached only through death to the selfish self and the world. At the same time, for Caterina the path to God and heaven also passes obligatorily through a certain kind of acceptance of this earthly existence. Pilgrims who accept with confidence in God the painful reality of their imperfect virtue and unfulfilled desire will speed ahead toward perfection and true happiness more easily and certainly. Caterina believes also that the hardships and the joys of loving one's neighbor, of engaging in an apostolate, and of paying close attention to potentially worldly things, such as family matters, war and peace negotiations, and the politics of Church reform, are necessary for the individual's growth in holiness. For Caterina and her contemporaries, engaging in such external activities does not hinder inner growth, but fosters deeper conversion and union with God. On this earth, the mystic neither leads the angelic life nor experiences purely transcendent Being. Rather, as Caroline Bynum suggests, God can be reached by sinking more fully into the "ordinary experience of physical and social vulnerability" (274). The early Renaissance "grammar of assent" meant waiting for God with both pain and hope, drawing nearer to Him through concrete things and events, and accepting fully the complexity and paradoxes of human existence.



\* \* \*

By the end of the summer of 1378, Caterina's confidence in God seemed to have been justified. The peace was proclaimed. The interdict ended. A new reformer Pope had been elected. Shortly thereafter, however, schism and war were plaguing the Church once again, and it seems fitting that Caterina died working and praying for, but not seeing yet, the happy resolution of these problems. Neither could she be certain about whether her efforts to convert Monna Costanza Soderini, Stefano Maconi, and Pope Urban VI had been fruitful or not. With the hindsight of history, we know that Stefano later became a Carthusian monk and was beatified by the Church; Urban remained bitter and went mad; I do not know what happened to Monna Costanza. But one imagines that Caterina died with hope for them all and confidence in God, following her famous maxim: "L'anima mia nel dolore gode ed esulta, perocché tra le spine sente l'odore della rosa che è per aprire" (2: 262).

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## **The Physical in the Mystical Writings of Catherine of Siena**

Carolyn Walker Bynum has described a transition in religious writing from an early medieval stress on judgment and atonement to a twelfth-century emphasis on creation in the divine image and on Christ's assumption of humanity, to a fourteenth-century stress on the individual's journey to God through sacramental grace and the practice of virtue. In the twelfth century, humankind is seen as "assured of its capacity for God by its very creation and by Christ's incarnation; it needs not so much a captor slain or a rupture in the universe knit up as a nudge along a preordained journey," while by the fourteenth century perfection and salvation are seen to depend far more on individual virtue (*Jesus as Mother* 16-17). Although hagiographical accounts of the life of Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) certainly fit the model Bynum describes for the fourteenth century, Catherine's own writings encompass and integrate the themes of the entire medieval era, with primary emphasis on incarnation and redemption as realizing the full truth of creation in the divine image and likeness. Catherine's central work, the *Dialogo*, joins at its core images of judgment and atonement, of the "slain captor who knits up a ruptured universe," and of the individual's journey toward God along the way which the "slain captor" becomes by himself atoning for the rupturing sin and bridging the rupture with his slain body. The virtues made whole in Christ are the stones in that bridge, and the mortar that in turn binds them into a whole is confectioned with his blood, Catherine's most encompassing symbol for all that is spoken in the theology of redemption, grace, and sacrament.

The writings of this fourteenth-century lay Dominican mystic are strongly biblical, drawing especially and continually from the Pauline and Johannine writings in a way that indicates her own saturation in and love for those writings and for the persons of John and Paul. The patristic echoes in her works, particularly Augustinian, certainly reflect the influence of her Augustinian and Dominican mentors. Through mentors of other orders comes a heartily affective



thread, particularly from the writings of Bernard de Clairvaux and Bonaventure. And of course there is the Thomistic-scholastic bent of her own order, which grounds all of her writings squarely in reason and doctrine.

Catherine's genius is not then in any innovative or ground-breaking concepts without which the evolution of theological thought would be changed, but in the originality and the clearly experiential and pastoral base of her personal synthesis as well as in the tight fabric of image and symbol into which her ideas are woven and interlocked.

Catherine had no formal schooling at all. Her knowledge was gleaned and accumulated primarily from sermons and from the conversations in which she relentlessly questioned and sparred with her mentors. She did learn to read, at least at a quite elementary level, by enlisting the services of her literate friend and disciple Alessa dei Saracini. In her late twenties she probably learned to write a bit. However, most if not all of her works were not written by her but dictated to scribes, and this not in the Latin of the scholars but in the emerging Tuscan vernacular. She is in fact the first woman whose works were written and disseminated in that vernacular. She wrote not to create or even follow a scholarly system, but simply to share her insights with anyone she thought might profit from them, whether for their personal growth or for the good of the Church.

The most central of her works is, as noted above, the *Dialogo*, which she herself called simply "the book."<sup>1</sup> In it she attempts very consciously to present her synthesis of the human journey to God by way of Christ as bridge. Though by far the most widely read of her works in the decades immediately following her death, and the most frequently translated over the centuries, the *Dialogo* is the most formal and the least intimate of her writings. Yet very obviously it is written out of her experience as well as out of her learning and reflection. Because of its attempt at synthesis and because it was written fairly late in her public career (1377-1378), the *Dialogo* is the place where the intertwining and integrating of her concepts and images is most accessible and most obvious.<sup>2</sup>

But for a more complete understanding of Catherine's thought, one must consult also her other works. We possess three hundred eighty-two of her letters (or a few more if duplicates or near duplicates sent to separate addressees are counted). They span a period from the early 1370s until a few months before her death in April of 1380. Each of these letters has a clear underlying purpose and logic, written as they were to instruct, guide, or persuade. They yield a splendid picture of Catherine's relationship with the persons to whom they are addressed (mostly her familiars, but also kings, queens, and popes, prisoners and prostitutes), of her intense convictions and emotions, and of the development of

<sup>1</sup> The reference is in *Let. T179*, to Francesco Pipino and his wife Agnesa, in Florence, where she writes: "Date a Francesco [Malavolti?] el libro . . . , perché vi vovlio scrivere alcuna cosa. . . ."

<sup>2</sup> All citations are taken from Cavallini's Italian edition, with translations from Noffke.

her thought over those last years of her short life.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, there is a small collection of twenty-six of her prayers (*Le orazioni*), written down by friends and disciples as she prayed aloud in her frequent trances. In these prayers, the majority from her final two years, we find an expression of Catherine's mysticism at its most spontaneous, most intimate, most mature.<sup>4</sup>

In harmony with the intent of this volume, it is these sources, Catherine's own works, that I have chosen to consult to assess the place of the physical in Catherine's mystical theology. Rather than depend on hagiographers' interpretations of her mysticism, I look to what she herself writes of it in both theory and the occasional direct recounting of her experiences.<sup>5</sup>

It must be noted that all of Catherine's theological thinking is one with her mysticism, since all of it is mediated and integrated through her relationship with God. And all of it is ultimately pastoral, since her mysticism very early became one with her life of service and concern for others and for the Church.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, though it may seem I am departing often from the strictly mystical

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<sup>3</sup> Citations of letters noted with T/DT are taken from the Dupré Theseider edition, with translations from the Noffke translation. ("T" indicates the numeration of Tommaseo; "DT," that of Dupré Theseider and Noffke). Transcriptions of other letters are from the Tommaseo edition, corrected from the manuscripts and/or the unpublished notes of Dupré Theseider and Antonio Volpato. The translations are mine, as they will appear in forthcoming volumes (which will eventually comprise the first complete translation of Catherine's letters in English).

<sup>4</sup> All citations are taken from the Cavallini edition, with translations from Noffke, 1983. Note that the numbering system used in the Noffke translation (based on chronology) differs from that used in Latin and Italian editions; a Roman numeral indicates Cavallini's numeration, followed after a slash by the Noffke numeration.

<sup>5</sup> Bynum, 1987, 165-180, bases her observations primarily on the hagiographical *Legenda* of Raimondo da Capua and so presents a somewhat different picture of Catherine's mysticism than emerges from Catherine's own writings. However, the difference is basically one of emphasis, for one can find at least some expression in Catherine's writings of all the characteristics noted by Bynum. Yet this difference of emphasis is, as I hope to demonstrate, highly significant.

<sup>6</sup> As Catherine entered the marriageable teen years, she was determined to join a group of Sienese laywomen known as the *Mantellate*, widows who lived by a Dominican rule and pledged their remaining time and their resources to the service of the sick and the poor. She argued and connived her way into the order, only to plunge immediately after her profession into contemplative solitude. But through this very prayer in solitude she eventually (after about three years) came to see that she had been engaged in a "one-footed, one-winged" attempt at the journey into God. In the midst of the intimacy of a mystical espousal with Christ, she was reminded that the commandment of love is a double one. "You have to walk my way on two feet; you have to fly to heaven on two wings" (Raimondo da Capua, *Legenda major*, II, i, 121). She wrestled with that imperative to break her isolation in order to integrate her love for God with active concern for others, but break it she did. The more deeply contemplative her prayer became after that insight, the more inexorably it directed her efforts outward in service. Likewise, the more intense her external ministry became, the more deeply she was driven into prayer.

dimensions of Catherine's life and thought, this approach simply reflects her own intense integration of mysticism with the whole of her life and thought.

It would seem most logical in assessing any aspect of Catherine's mystical theology to begin with her view of God, then proceed to Christ, to the Church, and finally to individual spirituality. However, as soon as we begin to look for any physicality in her relationship to and speaking of God, we realize that, apart from a few images, for Catherine the physicality of God is Jesus Christ. The Persons of the Trinity are imaged as table (Father), food (Word), and waiter (Spirit),<sup>7</sup> and as the light, color, and warmth of the indivisible sun (*Dialogo* 110). And union with God is imaged as the fish in the sea and the sea in the fish (*Dialogo* 2, 112; *Orazione* XIII/20), the dampness in wood consumed by fire until the wood is all fire (*Let.* T137/DT45; T164/DT58), and the drop of water (or wine or vinegar) dissolved in the furnace or in the sea (*Let.* T185/DT54, T282, T314; *Orazione* XVI/23). But even these images are, in their full development, Christological, woven in with Catherine's central Christological symbol, the blood.

Further, all of Catherine's Christology (as well as her ecclesiology and spirituality) is reducible to and inseparable from the two mysteries central to her living and her writing: incarnation and redemption, two mysteries which for her are really one.

*Mistero*, "mystery," is for her a reality which integrates the spiritual and the physical, the human and the divine. *Mistero* is the phenomenon of the divine embracing the human, and the human in turn embracing the divine. It penetrates everything. She seems to distinguish between those persons who live in recognition of the fact that "there is nothing without mistero" and those who do not recognize this.<sup>8</sup> It is for her a highly sacramental concept, referable to the mundane perplexities of life as truly as to the formal sacraments of the Church. And incarnation/redemption is at the heart of *mistero* as quintessentially the

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<sup>7</sup> Letters T104, 112, 374, 384. The designation "T" indicates the numbering system used by Niccolò Tommaseo in his edition of the letters (1860), and in subsequent editions based thereon.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., *Let.* T250, to Giovanni di Gano da Orvieto: "[M]a colui che è alluminato di questa dolce volontà di Dio . . . non giudicando con mormorazione, e scandalo di colui che egli vuole consigliare; ma per sì fatto modo, che sta e rimane senza pena. Onde, se egli s'attiene al consiglio suo, godene; e se egli non vi s'attiene al consiglio suo, giudica dolcemente che non è senza misterio e senza necessità, e con provvidenza e volontà di Dio." ("Those who are enlightened by this gentle will of God . . . don't grumblingly pass judgment on or find a stumbling block in those they would counsel, but do it in such a way that they are and remain without pain. So if the other abides by their counsel they are glad, but if he or she doesn't accept it, they quietly discern that it is not without mystery and necessity and providence and God's will.") Also, *Let.* T344, to Raimondo da Capua, after she has scolded him roundly for his cowardice: ". . . in tutto vorrei che fuste andato. Pongomene, niente di meno, in pace, perché son certa che veruna cosa è fatta senza misterio. . . ." ("I really wish you had gone. But still I am at peace about it because I am certain that nothing is done without mystery. . . .")



divine embracing the human.

Catherine's understanding of the incarnation of the Word, and of redemption as the whole object of that incarnation, is nested inextricably in her understanding of our creation in God's Trinitarian image and likeness (the latter a thread which shuttles in and out of all her thought and prayer). We are creatures who remember and ponder in likeness to the Father, who is power and gives us all the blessings that fill our remembering, our holding within. We are intelligent in likeness to the Word, God's only-begotten Son, God's Wisdom. And we reach out in decision and in love in likeness to the Spirit, who is merciful love. Memory, understanding, will: the human mirror of the Trinity and for Catherine the very stuff of incarnation and redemption, the locus of *mistero*. Memory, understanding, and will are diverted from their purpose in Adam's fall and restored to their full truth in incarnation/redemption.

Jesus, the Word made flesh, is "tutto Dio, tutto uomo," a concept Catherine develops and redevelops in context after context in relation to that Trinitarian imaging and the immanent Trinitarian life of God.

Incarnation/redemption is a divine, a Trinitarian affair. So she addresses Mary on the Feast of the Annunciation in 1379:

Tu, O Maria, se' fatta libro nel quale oggi è scritta la regola nostra. In te oggi è scritta la sapienza del Padre eterno, in te si manifesta oggi la fortezza e libertà de l' uomo. Dico che si mostra la dignità de l' uomo però che se io rguardo in te, Maria, veggo che la mano dello Spirito santo ha scritta in te la Trinità, formando in te el Verbo incarnato, unigenito Figliuolo di Dio: scripseci la sapienza del Padre, ciò è esso Verbo; hacci scritto la potencia, però che fu potente a fare questo grande misterio; e hacci scritto la clemencia d'esso Spirito santo, ché solo per grazia e clemencia divina fu ordinato e compito tanto misterio.

(*Orazione XI/18*)

(You, O Mary, have been made a book in which our rule is written today. In you today is written the eternal Father's wisdom; in you today our human strength and freedom are revealed. I say that our human dignity is revealed because if I look at you, Mary, I see that the Holy Spirit's hand has written the Trinity in you by forming within you the incarnate Word, God's only-begotten Son. He has written for us the Father's Wisdom, which the Word is; he has written power for us, because he was powerful enough to accomplish this great mystery; and he has written for us his own — the Holy Spirit's — mercy, for by divine grace and mercy alone was such a great mystery ordained and accomplished.)

When God's wisdom came into the world, "the whole Trinity was there" (*Orazione XX/10*: "tutta la Trinità ci fu").

But it is also a human, physical affair. Catherine uses numerous images in speaking of the incarnation, but while they are very physical, most of them are not as "fleshy" as one might expect in her era. She often, for example, speaks of

the mystery of incarnation/redemption as a double engrafting, first of the Word into our humanity and then of Jesus onto the wood of the cross.

O Trinità, Deità eterna! Amore! . . . innestando la deità tua ne l'arbore morto della nostra umanità. E bastava alla tua carità d'avere fatta con lei questa unione? Non. E però tu, Verbo eterno, inaffiasti questo arbore col sangue tuo. Questo sangue per lo calore suo el fa germinare, se l'uomo col libero arbitrio innesta sé in te e teco unisce e lega el cuore e l'affetto suo, legando e fasciando questo innesto con la fascia della carità. . . . e destici questi frutti in virtù dello innesto della tua deità nella umanità nostra, e per lo innesto che tu facesti del corpo tuo nel legno della croce. . . .

(*Orazione X/17*)

(O Trinity, eternal Godhead! Love! . . . you engrafted your divinity into the dead tree of our humanity. . . . And was it enough for your charity to have effected such a union with your creature? No. So you, eternal Word, watered this tree with your blood. With its warmth this blood makes the tree bear fruit, if only we use our free choice to engraft ourselves into you, . . . binding and wrapping the graft with the band of charity. . . . [Y]ou gave us these fruits through the engrafting of your divinity into our humanity, and through the engrafting of your body onto the wood of the cross.)<sup>9</sup>

The imagery here is closely bound up with the central symbolism of Christ's blood, of which we shall speak more at length later. Already here we see the blood identified with both water and fire (warmth, the Holy Spirit). The tree, once engrafted with divinity and redeemed in the tree of the cross, becomes the living tree whose sap, enlivened by the blood, generates branches to support one's neighbors and fruits to feed them, as well as flowers of glory to the Creator (*Dialogo* 10, 11, 154; *Let.* T113).

Images for Mary's role in the incarnation tumble out one upon another in the prayer for the Feast of the Annunciation cited above. Mary is "bearer of the fire" ("portatrice del fuoco"), "seedbed of the fruit" ("germinatrice del fructo"), "newsprung plant from whom we have the fragrant blossom" ("Tu, Maria, se' quella pianta novella della quale aviamo el fiore odorifero del Verbo unigenito Figliuolo di Dio, però che in te, terra fruttifera, fu seminato questo Verbo"). She is a "chariot of fire [who] bore the fire hidden and veiled under the ashes of [her] humanness" ("carro di fuoco, tu portasti el fuoco nascosto e velato sotto la cennere della tua umanità"). (Recall that before the invention of matches live coals were banked with ashes to preserve the fire.) Mary's womb is "the pouch of our humanity" ("vile saccuccio della sua umanità") in which the Word is enclosed. She is "blessed among all women" for having shared with humankind her "flour," so that "the Godhead is joined and kneaded into one dough with our humanity" ("O Maria, benedetta sia tu tra tutte le femine in seculum seculi, ché

<sup>9</sup> See also *Letters* T27, 101/DT23, 211/DT70.

oggi tu ci hai dato della farina tua. Oggi la deità è unita ed impastata con l'umanità nostra sì fortemente che mai non si poté separare, né per morte né per nostra ingratitudine, questa unione . . ."). And Catherine goes so far as to blush with pride that in Mary God has become our relative, a member of the family. ("Vergognati, anima mia, vedendo che Dio oggi ha fatto parentado con teo in Maria").<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to the actual birth of Jesus, Catherine's accounts are usually physically descriptive enough, yet very like accounts of the nativity in other medieval authors such as Bonaventure, Bianco da Siena, and Bernardino da Siena.<sup>11</sup>

Grande cosa è a vedere il dolce e buono Gesù, che governa e pasce tutto l'universo, e esso medesimo in tanta miseria e necessità che non è veruno che sia simile a lui. Egli è mendico in tanto che Maria non ebbe panno dove involgere il figliuolo suo.

(*Let.* T29/DT18, to Regina della Scala)

(It is an awesome thing to see the good gentle Jesus, the one who rules and feeds the whole universe, in such great want and need that no one else has

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<sup>10</sup> We might note in this context that while Catherine often speaks of the body as an obstacle, as "a sack of dung" and "the corrupt clay of Adam," she is careful to clarify that she means this only in the sense of its being used as an instrument for selfishness and sin. She recognizes that the body is also a gift of God and is meant to be an instrument for good, that nothing that God has made is evil. See *Let.* T317, to Giovanna of Naples: ". . . cioè, che ogni cosa che ha in sé essere, s'ami in Dio e per Dio, che è essa verità, e senza lui nulla . . ." ("I mean we must love in God and for God's sake everything that has being, because God is Truth itself, and without God nothing has being").

<sup>11</sup> Bonaventure, *Meditationes*, ed. G. Gigli, p. 52: ". . . la nostra Donna, che non avea panni dove fasciare . . ." (" . . . our Lady, who had no clothes to swaddle him in . . ."); Bianco da Siena, *Lauda* XIII, 9: "O Iesu poverello / sol per noi aricchire / d'infinita ricchezza, / o dolce mamolello, / nulla di che coprire / avea la tua altezza!" ("Oh poor Jesus, for no other reason than to enrich us with infinite wealth — oh dear nursing — your exaltedness had nothing to be covered with!") Bernardino da Siena, *Prediche*, XIX, says that the Virgin had "né fasce né pezze" ("neither swaddling clothes nor blankets") for Jesus. Catherine is more vividly descriptive when she is speaking of normal human conception and birth, as when she is writing to her brother Benincasa about his relationship with their mother Lapa (*Let.* T18/DT14): "O ingratitudine! non avete considerato la fatica del parto né 'l latte ch' ella trasse del petto suo, né le molte fatiche ch'ella ha avute di voi e di tutti gli altri. E se mi diceste ch'ella non abia avuto pietà di noi, dico che non è vero; ch'ella n'è avuto tanta, di voi e dell'altro, che caro le costa. Ma poniamo caso che fusse vero: voi sete ubrigato a lei, e non lei a voi. Ella non trasse la carne di voi, ma ella dié la sua a voi" ("Oh ingratitude! You've thought nothing of the pains of childbirth or the milk she gave you from her breast or all her trouble over you and the others. And if you tell me, 'She had no concern for us!' I say, 'Not so! In fact, she was so concerned about you and your brother that it cost her most dearly.' But let's suppose it were true — it is you who are obligated to her, not she to you. She didn't take your flesh, but gave you hers").



ever been as poor as he. He is so poor that Mary hasn't a blanket to wrap him in.)<sup>12</sup>

Yet her feminine and poetic sensibilities do come to the fore when she writes to the artist Andrea Vanni:

[P]regovi che vi ritroviate in questo dolce avvento e nella santa pasqua, nel Presepio<sup>13</sup> con questo dolce e umile Agnello, dove troverete Maria con tanta riverenza a quel figliuolo, e peregrina in tanta povertà, avendo la ricchezza del Figliuolo di Dio; che non ha panno condecante di poterlo invollere; né fuoco da scaldare esso fuoco, Agnello immacolato: ma gli animali eziandio, sopra il corpo del fanciullo, il riscaldavano col fiato loro.

(*Let.* T363)

(I am asking you during this dear Advent and at this holy feast to discover your [true] self once again in the manger with this gentle humble Lamb. There you will find Mary, a pilgrim woman so poor, so worshipful of that son of hers. Her wealth is God's Son, yet she has no decent blanket in which to wrap him, no fire to warm the ultimate Fire, the spotless Lamb, though even the animals hover over the infant's body and warm him with their breath.)

She thanks the leatherworker Giovanni Perotti of Lucca and his wife Lippa for the gift of a dressed *bambino* (a specialty of Lucca, very possibly sent her at Christmastime), but immediately uses the occasion to counsel:

E siccome per carità e per amore vestiste il Bambino di drappo; così vesta egli voi di sé medesimo, uomo nuovo, Cristo crocifisso. Ringraziovi molto.

(*Let.* T160)

(Just as you in your love and charity dressed the *bambino* in silk, so may he clothe you with himself, the new self, Christ crucified. Thank you very much.)

Though hagiography speaks of Catherine's being given the infant Jesus to hold and of seeing the infant in the host at Mass,<sup>14</sup> Catherine herself never mentions such experiences. Her expressed relationship with Christ is primarily with Christ as adult. Even in her accounting of her first visionary experience at

<sup>12</sup> Here, as in *Dialogo* 151, Catherine follows a tradition well documented but nevertheless at variance with Lk. 2, 7: "... and wrapped him in swaddling clothes. . . ."

<sup>13</sup> Note that she says "in," not "at," the manger ("nel presepio"), signifying that one finds one's true self in the person of Christ, not simply by contemplating him. Andrea Vanni is the artist who will later paint Catherine's portrait on the wall of the Church of San Domenico in Siena.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Raimondo da Capua, *Legenda major*, II, vi, 181.

age six, Christ is an adult.<sup>15</sup> She calls him "that wonderful loving young man" ("dolcissimo e amantissimo giovane")<sup>16</sup> and "mad lover" ("pazzo d'amore").<sup>17</sup> She images him as a knight, a captain, a bridegroom, a shepherd, and gatekeeper, a gardener, a sower, a servant, a guide; an eagle, a lamb, a lion; a rock, a flower, a book, a wall, a gate, a road, a garment, a cornerstone, a pillar, an anvil. In the *Dialogo* she develops at great length and in minute detail the image of the bridge as the crucified body of Christ, an image which very interestingly occurs nowhere else in her writings except in the long letter to Raimondo da Capua which became the initial framework for her book (*Dialogo* 26-87; *Let.* T272).

But in her most powerful grapplings with the personal identity of Christ, Catherine leaves images behind, perhaps as inadequate to her purposes.

[T]anto fu l'amore suo inestimabile verso di noi che corse alla obbrobriosa morte della croce, non curando stratii, obbrobrii, villanie e vituperio, ma tutti gli passava e punto non gli temeva, tanto era l'affamato desiderio che egli aveva dell'onore del Padre e della salute nostra, però che al tutto l'amore gli aveva fatto perdere sé in quanto uomo.

(*Let.* T229/DT69, to Pope Gregory XI)

(Such was his boundless love for us that he ran to the shameful death of the cross heedless of torment, shame, insult, and outrage. He suffered them all, totally free of fear, such was his hungry desire for the Father's honor and our salvation. For love had made him completely let go of himself, in so far as he was human.)

This "letting go of himself" was his passion and death. In addressing this in *Orazione XIII/20* (Easter week, 1379), Catherine rises to rare metaphysical heights:

[D]icesti che così bisognava che patisse Cristo e che per la via de la croce intrasse in la sua gloria. . . . E gli dischiari le scritture, ma essi non t'intendevano perché era offuscato lo intelletto loro, ma tu medesimo t'intendevi. Quale era la tua gloria, o dolce e amoroso Verbo? Eri tu medesimo: a ciò che intrassi in te medesimo bisognava che tu patissi.

(*Orazione XIII/20*)

(You said that Christ had to suffer so, and by the way of the cross enter into his glory. . . . You explained the Scriptures to them [the disciples going to Emmaus], but they failed to understand because their minds were darkened.

<sup>15</sup> Raimondo da Capua, *Legenda major*, I, ii, 29, says that Jesus was clothed in pontifical vestments, with a tiara on his head. One wonders to what extent Catherine's later telling of the episode is colored by her then intensely ecclesial spirituality and devotion to the papacy.

<sup>16</sup> The expression occurs only twice: in *Let.* T30/DT1, to the nuns of Santa Marta in Siena, and in *Let.* T41/DT3, to Tommaso dalla Fonte — both, interestingly, very early letters (1374 or earlier).

<sup>17</sup> This expression occurs more often: *Let.* T52, 97, 369; *Dialogo* 30, 153, 167; *Orazioni* 13/IV, 17/X, 10/XX.

But you understood. What then was your glory, O gentle loving Word? You yourself — and you had to suffer in order to enter into your very self!)

This is the “self-emptying” of which Paul writes, in which the Word made flesh receives “the name above all other names” (Phil. 2:7), his “very self,” in Catherine’s interpretation.

So redemption is but the ultimate aspect of incarnation. And in spite of the abandonment of image just illustrated, when Catherine’s attention turns specifically to the redemption aspect of the *mistero*, she becomes much more intimately involved on a physical level. Her descriptions and images here seem also to be much more closely bound up with her related mystical experiences, not at all surprising in view of the centrality of devotion to the passion in the fourteenth century. Yet there is nothing of the grotesquely graphic in this physicality. Always it is made to serve the theological message.

The notion of atonement is definitely part of her thinking. In *Orazione XI/18* she narrates at length the story of the debate between justice and mercy within the eternal council after the sin of Adam, in which justice demands infinite satisfaction for an offense against an infinite God while mercy chooses to work out that satisfaction in the person of the very Word of God. Her more predominant interpretation of the mystery of redemption, however, is the refashioning of the creature made in the image of the Trinity (memory, understanding, will) but fallen into sin. Both elements are seen very powerfully in her treatment of the circumcision of Jesus, which though temporally closer to his birth is for Catherine both theologically and physically more closely identified with his death.

[I]n capo degli otto dì se gli levò tanta carne quanto uno cerchio d’anello, e cominciò a pagarci l’arra, per darci pienamente speranza del pagamento, el quale ricevemmo in sul legno della santissima croce, quando questo sposo, agnello immacolato, fu svenato, che da ogni parte versa abbondantia di sangue, col quale lavò l’immonditie e peccati della sposa sua, cioè l’umana generatione.

(*Let.* T143/DT39, to Giovanna of Naples)

(On the eighth day just enough flesh was taken from him to make a circlet of a ring; to give us a sure hope of payment in full he began by paying this pledge. And we received the full payment on the wood of the most holy cross, when this Bridegroom, the spotless Lamb, poured out his blood freely from every member and with it washed away the filth and sin of humankind his spouse.)

In every parallel reference (*Let.* T50, 221, 262, 330, 341) Jesus espouses the human race on the day of his circumcision with this ring of flesh. But note that Catherine consistently calls her disciples to respond by espousing Truth with the



ring of faith.<sup>18</sup> This may well be an echo of Catherine's experience of mystical espousal to Christ, which Raimondo da Capua implies he was told of by Catherine herself. Jesus is there portrayed as giving her "a gold ring set with four pearls surmounted by a splendid diamond . . . not seen, indeed, by others, but visible to Catherine's eyes." Significantly, the context of the espousal experience is a Lent during which Catherine has been praying repeatedly for a deepening of her faith, a prayer to which the response has always seemed to be simply the passage from Hosea: "I will espouse you to myself in faith."<sup>19</sup>

So redemption for Catherine is both the payment of a debt in justice and an act of intimate love. And the vehicle of that love is the bond of truth, lived out in faith. The very physical image of the ring of flesh carries for Catherine a theological burden far heavier than mere religious sentiment! The tender infancy story leads her immediately into the depths of the *mistero* in its wholeness.

Tu ne hai mostrato oggi il cenere della nostra mortalità in te, a ciò che conosciamo, nel cenere, noi per te, e ti sei mostrato passibile pagando l'arra e rinnovando noi nell'amore della tua santissima passione, a ciò che in tuo esempio sopportiamo volentieri le passioni nostre. . . . Oggi ancora per la tua clemenza sposi a te l'anime nostre con lo anello de la tua carità, da dovere essere sposate da te . . . ciò è per la legge con la quale facci loro essere partecipi de la tua eternità.

(Orazione XIV/25, Feast of the Circumcision, 1380)

(You have shown us today the ashes of our mortality in yourself, so that in the ashes we may come to know ourselves in you. You have shown us yourself as one who can suffer, making the down payment and stirring us up in the love of your most holy Passion, so that after your example we may bear our own passions willingly. . . . Today again in your mercy you espouse our souls to you with the ring of your flesh, the ring of your charity, to be espoused to you by law . . . , by that law, I mean, through which you make us sharers in your eternity.)

Catherine's prevasive preoccupation with the blood of Christ as symbol of all that is embraced within the mystery of redemption is like a dye that colors all of her writings. But the blood is not simply an explicitness meant to elicit pity

<sup>18</sup> See *Let.* T262, to Tora Gambacorta: "[A]vendola Dio fatta sposa del Verbo del suo Figliuolo, il quale dolce Gesù la sposò colla carne sua (perocché, quand'egli fu circumciso, tanta carne si levò nella circoncisione quanta è una estremità d'uno anello, in segno che come sposo voleva sposare l'umana generazione). . . . [S]pòsati a esso Cristo crocifisso coll'anello della santissima fede." "God made [you] a spouse of the Word, his Son, and the gentle Jesus espoused [you] with his flesh (for when he was circumcised as much flesh was removed as the circlet of a ring, signifying that he wanted to wed humankind as our Bridegroom). . . . Wed yourself to Christ crucified with the ring of most holy faith." Also T330, to Raimondo da Capua, and T341, to Angelo, bishop of Castellano.

<sup>19</sup> Raimondo da Capua, *Legenda major*, I, xii, 115. The Hosea passage is as in Vulgate 2:20.

for the suffering Christ. The blood, for Catherine, is life and glory; the blood is transformation. The blood is a cleansing bath, food and drink and sweetness and satiety. The blood is a garment. The blood is the light and warmth of a blazing fire. And the blood is therefore as much resurrection as passion!

There is "no blood without fire, nor fire without blood."<sup>20</sup> There is no separating the Word's gift of life from the Father's power or the Holy Spirit's love.

Annegatevi dunque nel sangue di Cristo crocifisso, e bagnatevi nel sangue, e inebriatevi del sangue, e saziatevi del sangue, e vestitevi di sangue. E se fuste fatto infedele, ribattezzatevi nel sangue; se il dimonio v'avesse offuscato l'occhio dell'intelletto, lavatevi l'occhio col sangue; se fuste caduto nella ingratitudine de' doni non cognosciuti, siate grato nel sangue; se fuste pastore vile e senza la verga della giustizia, condita con prudenzia e misericordia, traetela dal sangue; e coll'occhio dell'intelletto vederla dentro nel sangue, e con la mano dell'amore pigliarla, e con ansietato desiderio strignerla. Nel caldo del sangue dissolvete la tepidezza; e nel lume del sangue caggia la tenebra; acciocché siate sposo della Verità e pastore vero e governatore delle pecorelle che vi sono messe tra le mani. . . . E di nuovo mi voglio vestire di sangue, e spogliami ogni vestimento ch'io avessi avuto per fine a qui. Io voglio sangue; e nel sangue satisfò e satisfarò all'anima mia. Ero ingannata quando la cercavo nelle creature. Sicché io voglio nel tempo della solitudine accompagnarvi nel sangue; e così truoverò il sangue e le creature; e berrò l'affetto e l'amore loro nel sangue.

(*Let. T102, to Raimondo da Capua*)

(Drown yourself, then, in the blood of Christ crucified. Bathe in the blood; get drunk on the blood; have your fill of the blood; clothe yourself in the blood. And if you have become unfaithful, be baptized again in the blood. If the devil has clouded over your mind's eye, wash it out with the blood. If you have fallen into ingratitude by not acknowledging gifts, become grateful in the blood. If you have been a bad shepherd and have no staff of justice tempered with prudence and mercy, get one from the blood; with your mind's eye see it in the blood and grasp it with the hand of love, and with restless desire hold it tight. In the heat of the blood melt your lukewarmness; in the light of the blood let the darkness give way, so that you may be espoused to truth, a true shepherd and caretaker of the little

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<sup>20</sup> *Let. T270, to Pope Gregory XI*: "Portinai sete del cellaio di Dio, cioè del sangue dell'unigenito suo Figliuolo, la cui vece rappresentate in terra; e per altre mani non si può avere il sangue di Cristo se non per le vostre. Voi pascete e nutocate li fedeli Cristiani: voi sete quella madre che alle mammelle della divina carità ci notocate; perocché non ci date sangue senza fuoco, né fuoco senza sangue. Perocché il sangue fu sparto con fuoco d'amore." ("You are the doorkeeper of God's wine cellar, the doorkeeper of the blood of his only-begotten Son, whose representative you are on earth. From no hands but yours can we have the blood of Christ. You feed and nurture faithful Christians; you are the mother who nurses us at the breasts of divine charity, giving us neither blood without fire nor fire without blood, since the blood was shed with blazing love.")

sheep that have been entrusted to you. . . . I want all over again to clothe myself in blood and to strip myself of every garment I may have had up to now. I want blood, and in the blood my soul is and will be satisfied. I was deluded when I looked for [satisfaction] in other people. So in times of loneliness I want to find companionship in the blood, and in this way I will find both the blood and these other people, and in the blood I will drink their love and affection.”)

Nowhere does Catherine address the mystery of the blood with more personal emotion (and at the same time with theological consistency) than in her letter to Raimondo after her assistance at the execution of Niccolò di Toldo, a young Perugian beheaded by the Sienese government. The charge was sedition, and Catherine had been called to intervene because the case directly involved the tensions between the papacy and the Commune of Siena. She tells of Niccolò's death in the breathless and sometimes tangled language which characterizes her dictations while in a state of ecstatic trance (*Let. T273/DT31*):

[V]jedendomi, cominciò a ridere, e volse che io gli facesse el segno della croce; e, ricevuto el segno, dissi: Giuso alle nozze, fratello mio dolce, ché testé sarai alla vita durabile! Posesi giù con grande mansuetudine, e io gli distesi el collo, e chinàmi giù e ramentàli el sangue dell'agnello: la bocca sua non diceva, se non “Gesù” e “Caterina”, e così dicendo ricevetti el capo nelle mani mie, fermando l'occhio nella divina bontà, dicendo: Io voglio. Allora si vedeva Dio e Uomo, come si vedesse la chiarezza del sole, e stava aperto, e riceveva sangue nel sangue suo: uno fuoco di desiderio santo, dato e nascosto nell'anima sua per gratia, riceveva nel fuoco della divina sua carità. Poi che ebbe ricevuto el sangue e 'l desiderio suo, ed egli ricevette l'anima sua, e la misse nella bottiga aperta del costato suo, pieno di misericordia, manifestando la prima verità che per sola gratia e misericordia egli el riceveva, e non per veruna altra operatione. O, quanto era dolce e inestimabile a vedere la bontà di Dio, con quanta dolcezza e amore aspettava quella anima partita dal corpo, — vòlto l'occhio della misericordia verso di lui, — quando venne a n'trare dentro nel costato, bagnato nel sangue suo, che valeva per lo sangue del Figliuolo di Dio! Così ricevuto da Dio, — per potentia fu potente a poterlo fare, — el Figliuolo, sapientia verbo incarnato, gli donò e fecegli partecipare el crociato amore, col quale elli ricevette la penosa e obrobiosa morte, per l'obedientia che elli osservò del Padre in utilità dell'umana natura e generatione. Le mani dello Spirito santo el serravano dentro. Ma elli faceva uno atto dolce, da trarre mille cuori (non me ne maraviglio, però che già gustava la divina dolcezza): volsesi come fa la sposa quando è giunta all'uscio dello sposo, che volle l'occhio e 'l capo adietro, inchinando chi l'ha accompagnata, e con l'atto dimostra segni di ringratiamento. Riposto che fu, l'anima mia si riposò in pace e in quiete, in tanto odore di sangue che io non potei sostenere di levarmi el sangue, che m'era venuto adosso, di lui. Oimé, misera miserabile, non voglio dire più: rimasi nella terra con grandissima invidia. Parmi che la prima pietra sia già



posta, e però non vi maravigliate se io non v'impongo che 'l desiderio di vedervi altro che anegati nel sangue e nel fuoco che versa el costato del Figliuolo di Dio. Or non più negligentia, figliuoli miei dolcissimi, poi che 'l sangue cominciò a versare e a ricevere vita.

(*Let. T273/DT31*)

([W]hen he saw me he began to laugh and wanted me to make the sign of the cross on him. When he had received the sign I said, "Down for the wedding, my dear brother, for soon you will be in everlasting life!" He knelt down very meekly; I placed his neck [on the block] and bent down and reminded him of the blood of the Lamb. His mouth said nothing but "Gesù!" and "Caterina!" and as he said this, I received his head into my hands, saying, "I will!" with my eyes fixed on divine Goodness. Then was seen the God-Man as one sees the brilliance of the sun. [His side] was open and received blood into his own blood — received a flame of holy desire (which grace had given and hidden in this soul) into the flame of his own divine charity. After he had received his blood and his desire, [Jesus] received his soul as well and placed it all-mercifully into the open hostelry of his side. Thus First Truth showed he was receiving him only through grace and mercy and not for anything he had done. Oh how boundlessly sweet it was to see God's goodness! With what tenderness and love he awaited that soul when it had left its body — the eye of his mercy turned toward it — when it came to enter into his side bathed in its own blood, which found its worth in the blood of God's Son! Once he had been so received by God (who by his power was powerful enough to do it), the Son, Wisdom and Word incarnate, gave him the gift of sharing in the tormented love with which he himself had accepted his painful death in obedience to the Father for the welfare of the human race. And the hands of the Holy Spirit locked him in.<sup>21</sup> As for him, he made a gesture sweet enough to charm a thousand hearts. (I'm not surprised, for he was already tasting the divine sweetness.) He turned as does a bride when, having reached her husband's threshold, she turns her head and looks back, nods to those who have attended her, and so expresses her thanks. Now that he was hidden away where he belonged, my soul rested in peace and quiet in such a fragrance of blood that I couldn't bear to wash away his blood that had splashed on me. Ah, poor wretch that I am, I don't want to say any more. With the greatest envy I remained on earth! It seems to me that the first stone is already laid.<sup>22</sup> So don't be surprised if I impose on you only

<sup>21</sup> Again, power, wisdom, and charity (implied in the text), are the essence of the three persons of the Trinity.

<sup>22</sup> See *Let. T295*: "... i gloriosi martiri i quali per la verità si disponevano alla morte, e ad ogni tormento; onde col sangue loro, sparto per amore del Sangue, fondavano le mura della santa chiesa." ("... the glorious martyrs, who were ready for any sort of witness, ready to suffer torture and death for the truth. With their blood, and for love of the blood, they form the foundation walls of holy Church.") Also *T333*: "... quanto sarebbe stata beata l'anima vostra e la mia, che col sangue vostro voi aveste murata una pietra nella santa Chiesa per amore del sangue! ("... how happy my soul would have been, and yours as well, to see that you had with your blood cemented a

my desire to see you drowned in the blood and fire pouring out from the side of God's Son. No more apathy now, my sweetest children, because the blood has begun to flow and to receive life!)

For Catherine, the symbolism of the blood carries the entire meaning of Christ's passion. She refers in one of her letters (to a wool-worker!) to Jesus as the Lamb on whose skin (lambskin, parchment) is written the bond of our indebtedness. The lambskin, the bond, is nailed to the cross and then torn apart, destroyed (*Let.* T69/DT, to Sano di Maco di Mazzacorno).<sup>23</sup> Christ's body bears the channels (his wounds) which irrigate the garden of our souls and of the Church, and water the tree of our humanity into which divinity has in the incarnation been engrafted (e.g., *Let.* T208/DT6, to Bartolomeo Dominici).

The redeeming Jesus is for Catherine also our mother, our wet-nurse. The blood that flows from his breast is the milk of charity, the fire of the Spirit. (Medieval physiology held that mother's milk actually was blood.)

A noi, carissima madre, conviene fare come fa il fanciullo, il quale volendo prendere il latte, prende la mammella della madre, e mettesela in bocca; onde col mezzo della carne trae a sé il latte: e così dobbiamo fare noi, se vogliamo nutrire l'anima nostra. Perocché ci dobbiamo attaccare al petto di Cristo crocifisso, in cui è la madre della carità; e col mezzo della carne sua trarremo il latte che nutrica l'anima nostra. . . .

(*Let.* T86, to the Abbess of the Monastery of Santa Maria delli Scalzi in Florence)

(We must do as the infant which, when it wants milk to drink, takes hold of its mother's breast and puts it into its mouth; then, through her flesh, it sucks out the milk. And this is what we must do if we want to feed our soul: we must cling to the breast of Christ crucified, for there is our mother, charity, and through his flesh we shall suck the milk that feeds our soul.)

The vividness of Catherine's maternal images are almost certainly related to her experience with her own mother. Catherine was the twenty-fourth of twenty-five children, a twin. Her twin, Giovanna, was let out to a wet-nurse and died shortly after. Catherine, on the other hand, was the only child Lapa was able to nurse to weaning at her own breast. Lapa as a consequence became extremely possessive of Catherine. In some ways Catherine fought this possessiveness, but in other ways she seems to have drawn on it for her own imagery. Had Lapa perhaps reminded Catherine of a situation that inspired the imagery in her letter to the prisoners of Siena?

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stone into the wall of holy Church for love of the blood!") These letters, too, are addressed to Raimondo.

<sup>23</sup> Significantly, the letter was probably written very shortly after her stigmata experience in Pisa in 1375.

Dico ch'egli è infermo cioè, che egli ha presa la nostra infirmità, prendendo la nostra mortalità, e carne mortale; e sopra a essa carne del dolcissimo corpo suo ha puniti e' difetti nostri. Egli ha fatto come fa la balia che nutrica il fanciullo, che, quand'egli è infermo, piglia la medicina per lui, perché il fanciullo è piccolo e debile, non potrebbe pigliare l'amaritudine, perché non si nutrica d'altro che di latte. O dolcissimo amore Gesù, tu sei balia che hai presa l'amara medicina, sostenendo pene, obbrobrii, strazii, villanie; legato, battuto, flagellato alla colonna, confitto e chiavellato in croce; satollato di scherni, obbrobrii; afflitto e consumato di sete senza neuno refrigerio: e gli è dato aceto mescolato con fiele, con grandissimo rimproverio: ed egli con pazienza porta, pregando per coloro che il crocifiggono. . . . Bene è vero adunque, che tu hai presa l'amara medicina per noi fanciulli debili e infermi, e colla tua morte ci dai la vita, e coll'amaritudine ci dà la dolcezza. Tu ci tieni al petto come balia, e hai dato a noi il latte della divina Grazia, e per te hai tolta l'amaritudine; e così riceviamo la sanità.

(*Let. T260, to the prisoners in Siena*)

([The Word] has taken on our weakness by taking on our mortality, our mortal flesh, and he took out the punishment for our sins on this flesh of his own wonderful body. He acted like a wet-nurse who is nursing a baby. When the baby is sick she takes the medicine for it because the baby is tiny and weak and wouldn't be able to tolerate the bitterness since it drinks nothing but milk. Oh dearest Love, Jesus! You are the wet-nurse who took the bitter medicine by enduring pain, disgrace, agony, insults; you were bound, beaten, scourged at the pillar, nailed fast to the cross; you were saturated with scorn and shame, tormented and consumed by thirst without any relief. They gave you vinegar mixed with gall and utter reproach. And you bore it patiently, praying for those who had crucified you.... So it really is true that you took the bitter medicine for us weak, sick babies, and through your death give us life. And with the bitterness you give us sweetness. You hold us to your breast like a wet-nurse, and have given us the milk of divine grace. You took the bitterness, and in this way we receive health.)

Does Catherine then have a concept of God as feminine? I doubt that the question could have occurred to her. In the theology of the day, God was masculine. Yet Catherine clearly had no qualms about imaging "him" as female or male.

We have seen Catherine image the soul as spouse of Christ and as infant feeding at his breast. But the theology she develops within the symbolism of the blood in the end points beyond either of these images. And in this we see again the total subservience of image to theology in Catherine's mysticism.

Catherine's disciples, basing themselves on the story of her mystical espousals, loved to identify Catherine as bride of Christ. This spousal relationship with God was generally regarded as the ultimate perfection of love. This is how Catherine herself was still seeing it at the time of her mystical



espousals at twenty. When she experienced Christ mystically placing a ring of espousal on her finger with those words from Hosea, her whole attention was riveted on the intimacy of the moment, an intimacy which seemed indeed to stretch forward into eternity. But it was precisely in the midst of that experience, the climax of her years of prayer in solitude, that she was made to see that not only God was involved here, but all the world as well.

By the time she wrote her *Dialogo* about ten years later she would insist that one is not yet perfect in love when one has become friend and even spouse to God. No, the height of love and union with God is to be found in becoming God's child (no infant now), in becoming conformed with God's only Son, the crucified, "the first-born of many sons and daughters" (Rom. 8, 29). The role of an heir is not merely to inherit the family wealth, but more importantly to carry on the family line. The blood of the crucified is the seed of the life of God, and in becoming one with the crucified, "joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8, 17), one enters into the redemptive mystery, ready to give one's own blood also for the life of the world, to give birth to the next generation of the children of God. She writes to Bartolomeo Dominici, who is apparently wearying of his preaching mission:

[F]ate come colui che molto beie, che perde sé medesimo e non si vede, e se 'l vino molto gli diletta, anco ne beie più, e intanto che, riscaldato lo stomaco dal vino, no 'l può tenere e sí 'l bomica fuore. Veramente, figliuolo, che su questa mensa troviamo questo vino, cioè el costato uperto del Figliuolo di Dio. Egli è quel sangue che scalda e caccia fuore ogni freddezza, rischiara la voce di colui che 'l beie, letifica l'anima e 'l cuore, perché questo sangue è parto col fuoco della divina carità. E scalda tanto l'uomo, che gitta sé fuore di sé, e quinci viene che non può vedere sé per sé, ma sé per Dio, e Dio per Dio, e 'l prossimo per Dio. E quando egli 'e bene beuto, egli el gitta sopra el capo de' fratelli suoi; à imparato da colui che in mensa continuamente versa, non per sua utilità, ma per nostra. Noi che mangiamo alla mensa, conformandoci col cibo, facciamo quello medesimo.

...

(Let. T208/DT6)

(Do as a heavy drinker does who loses himself and can no longer see himself. If he really likes the wine he drinks even more, till his stomach becomes so warmed by the wine that he can no longer hold it, and out it comes! Truly, son, here is the table on which we find this wine: I mean the pierced side of God's Son. This is the blood that warms, that drives out all chill, clears the voice of the one who drinks it, and gladdens heart and soul. For this blood is shed with the fire of divine charity. It so warms us that out we come from our very selves — and from that point on, we cannot see ourselves selfishly, but only for God, and we see God for God, and we see our neighbors for God. And when we have drunk enough, out it comes over the heads of our sisters and brothers. We have taken our example from the one who is continually pouring out his blood [his wine] at this table — and not

for his own good but for ours. We who eat at this table and become like the food we eat begin to do as he does.)<sup>24</sup>

And to Berengario, Abbot of Lézat:

[L]a memoria diventa una cosa con Cristo crocifisso, che altro non può ritenere né dilettere né pensare, se non che del diletto suo che egli ama; ché l'amore ineffabile el quale e' vede che egli è a lui e a tutta l'umana generatione, subito la memoria ritiene in sé, e diventa amatore di Dio e del prossimo suo, e 'n tanto che cento migliaia di volte ponrebbe la vita per lui.

(*Let. T109/DT51*)

(Your memory . . . becomes one with Christ crucified in that it cannot hold, enjoy, or think about anything except what the one you love enjoys. For memory quickly embraces the unutterable love it sees that God has for you and for the entire human race, and you become such a lover of God and of your neighbors that you would lay down your life for them a hundred thousand times.)

Even if Catherine's direct involvement in ecclesiastical politics had not given her mysticism an ecclesial quality, the logic of her theology would necessarily have led her to it. The Church for her embodies the continuation of the redemptive mission of Christ on earth. It is "the wine cellar of the blood" ("cellaio del sangue"), Christ's "mystic body" ("corpo mistico") and every member of that body is called to that same redemptive mission as its head. She speaks of "eating souls at the table of the cross" ("mangiare anime alla mensa della croce"), and in actual sacramental communion she prays that God "communicate to me the mystic body of holy Church and the universal body of Christianity. For in the fire of your charity I have come to know that this is the food in which you want the soul to delight" (*Orazione IV/13*: "che tu mi comunichi del corpo mistico della santa chiesa e del corpo universale della religione cristiana, perché nel fuoco della carità tua ho conosciuto che di questo cibo vuoi che l'anima si diletti"). To "eat souls" is to absorb and become one with them and with their well-being as the Word became one with humankind. It is to lay one's blood on the line for them as Christ did. So she prays in *Orazione XII/19*:

È vero che lo tuo Figliuolo non è per venire più se non in maiestate, a giudicare. . . . Ma, come vedo, tu chiami cristi li tuoi servi, e con questo

<sup>24</sup> The image of the drinker is found also in Augustine, *Enarratio in Ps. XXXV* (PL XXXVI, 351). Also *Enarratio in Ps. CXLIV*, 7 (PL XXXVII, 1874-1875): "Manducas cum discis, eructuas cum doces; manducas cum audis, eructuas cum praedicas. . . . [S]i vultis eructuare gratiam, bibite gratiam." ("When you are learning you are eating; when you are teaching you are overflowing; when you are listening you are eating; when you are preaching you are overflowing. . . . If you want to overflow with grace, drink grace.")

mezzo vuoi togliere la morte e rendere la vita al mondo. . . . O rimediatore ottimo, dånne adunque a noi di questi cristi, gli quali vivono continuamente in vigilie, in lacrime, in orationi per la salute del mondo. Tu gli chiami cristi<sup>25</sup> tuoi perché sono conformati nel tuo unigenito Figliuolo. Ah, eterno Padre, concedine che non siamo ignoranti ciechi o freddi, né di tanto oscuro vedere che non vediamo noi medesimi, ma dånne a cognoscere la volontà tua.

(Orazione XII/19)

(True, your Son is not about to come again except in majesty, to judge. . . . But, as I see it, you are calling your servants christs, and by means of them you want to relieve the world of death and restore it to life. . . . O best of remedy-givers! Give us then these christs, who will live in continual watching and tears and prayers for the world's salvation. You call them your christs because they are conformed to your only-begotten Son. Ah, eternal Father! Grant that we may not be foolish, blind, or cold, or see so darkly that we do not see ourselves, but give us the gift of knowing your will.)

It is in this context that we must see Catherine's asceticism — at least the more mature Catherine's asceticism. In her younger years she was extreme in her external penances simply because at that time she saw this as the accepted way to identification with Christ the sufferer. But in her more considered spirituality, end and means are far more finely differentiated. It is now clearly Christ the mediator and redeemer with whom her own blood is laid on the line. This can be and is for her very physical indeed, but the point is no longer in the physical reality as such but in its logic. This is the difference of emphasis which is so crucial in comparing the hagiographers' depiction of Catherine's asceticism — and the entirety of her mysticism — with her own expression of it.

There is a section of the *Dialogo* (88-97) which treats of tears, a common element in medieval spirituality. Catherine invites her readers to assess their tears — and so their love — by asking what it is they weep for:

Io voglio che tu sappi che ogni lagrima procede dal cuore, però che nullo membro è nel corpo che voglia soddisfare al cuore quanto l'occhio.

(*Dialogo* 89)

(I want you to know that all tears come from the heart. Nor is there any other bodily member that can satisfy the heart as the eyes can.)

Tears shed in fear of punishment or for the loss of one's own comfort and consolation are mere self-pity and a sign of self-absorption. Tears of compassion reveal unselfish love. Love for God brings tears of happiness for God's goodness and of sadness for sin, "a lover's lament." But what of those who have no tears at all? asks Catherine.

<sup>25</sup> The context makes it clear that Catherine is by "christs" referring here to all the baptised, not only to the ordained.



[A]cci altro modo che lagrima d'occhio? Sì: ecci uno pianto di fuoco, cioè di vero e santo desiderio, il quale si consuma per affetto d'amore. Vorrebbe dissolvere la vita sua in pianto per odio di sé e salute dell'anime, e non pare che possa. Dico che costoro ànno lagrima di fuoco, in cui piagne lo Spirito santo dinanzi a me per loro e per lo prossimo loro, cioè dico che la divina mia carità accende con la sua fiamma l'anima che offera ansietati desideri dinanzi a me, senza lagrima d'occhio. Dico che queste sono lagrime di fuoco: per questo modo dicevo che lo Spirito santo piagne.

(*Dialogo* 91)

(Is there another way than physical tears? Yes. There is a weeping of fire, of true holy longing, and it consumes in love. Such a soul would like to dissolve her very life in weeping in self-contempt and for the salvation of souls, but she seems unable to do it. I tell you, these souls have tears of fire. In this fire the Holy Spirit weeps in my presence for them and for their neighbors. I mean that my divine charity sets ablaze with its flame the soul who offers me her restless longing without any physical tears. These, I tell you, are tears of fire, and this is how the Holy Spirit weeps.)

A physical mysticism? Perhaps and even probably the stories Raimondo and the other hagiographers tell of Catherine do reflect with a good degree of fidelity the external facts of her life. Even by her own testimony there was in her mysticism a large dose of the ecstatic and the visionary, of vividly imagined and physically experienced communication with the heavenly, of physically acted out devotion and asceticism. But an examination of Catherine's own writings makes very clear that for her the reason for every recounting of a physically vivid experience, for every image introduced and woven into the fabric, is to clarify for her readers a view of God and of human spirituality which both incorporates and transcends the physical. It is a vision of the divine embracing the human. It is the blood and the fire. It is the *mistero* of flesh and spirit redeemed in the flesh and the Spirit, redeemed into the ultimate truth and love that is God.

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## The Written Woman Writes: Caterina da Siena Between History and Hagiography, Body and Text

The body of Santa Caterina da Siena lies in the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva in Rome, where she died in 1380 at the legendary age of thirty-three. Beneath the altar there, a fifteenth-century effigy figures her white-robed body resting in beatified death, ensconced in gold. But the serene intactness of this representation belies the fact that Caterina actually reposes, both literally and figuratively, in a radically divided state. While her bones molder in the electric-blue air of the only gothic church in Rome, her head, enbalmmed and framed by her white wimple, is enshrined a hundred miles away in a small chapel of the austere Basilica di San Domenico in Siena, where it was taken by her disciples after her death, severed from the body of their beloved “*Mamma*” by their own hands. This act of devotion, which transforms dead flesh into divinely infused relic, is also, however, an act of violence, one which physically mirrors the fragmentation undergone by the woman Caterina Benincasa in the course of her transformation into Santa Caterina — in the transmission and reception of her life, thought, and writings in the eight decades between her death and her canonization, and in the five centuries that have passed since then. To distinguish between Caterina Benincasa, the historical woman who lived in Siena in the third quarter of the fourteenth century, and Santa Caterina, the holy personage inscribed in the pages of a hagiographical text and declared by the Church to be dwelling among the blessed, is at once an intellectual necessity and an epistemological impossibility. We feel we must know what Caterina really did, said, and was in order to understand how and why she became a saint, what it was that gave her the power to break free from the constraints placed upon medieval women, and how she managed to be transgressive and yet be canonized. But all we “have” of Caterina has been filtered through a sieve of sanctity — her

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\* I would like to thank Caroline Bynum, Joan Ferrante, Eric Jager, and the many medievalists at Columbia University who have seen this project through its several incarnations.

disciples edited her letters, her confessor made public her mystical *Libro*, her *Life* was written expressly with the goal of seeing her canonized — and there is not one word written in Caterina Benincasa's own hand. So we throw up *our* hands: Santa Caterina is all we have, and she is a text, a text written by men. The real woman has been fragmented and scattered haphazardly and irretrievably among the tropes and generic formulae of medieval hagiography, male-inscribed and replete with the gender stereotypes of a misogynist culture.

This *is* true. However, to dichotomize the figures of Caterina and Santa Caterina may in itself be a mistake, another fragmentation predicated upon the assumption of a stable, fixed, and unified identity, of a "real" Caterina who can somehow be recuperated with enough textual criticism or archival research. If what Judith Butler has written about gender can be seen as true also about sanctity, then what seems to be a problem of sources becomes a heuristic device with which to interrogate the self-construction of the saint: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 25). This is not to say that there is no such thing as a saint; rather I wish to suggest that there is no such thing as a Caterina Benincasa separate from Santa Caterina, not because she has been lost in the textual constructs of hagiography, but because she constructed herself as a hagiographic text. However, her own Santa Caterina is not identical to the official one presented by the Church, and the difference indeed revolves around the gendered body and its role in mystical experience.<sup>1</sup> An analysis of Caterina's writings — her nearly four-hundred letters and her mystical treatise — reveals that Caterina does not, in fact, "perform" gender; she neither speaks of herself as a woman nor employs the topoi often associated with female writers of the Middle Ages. She does, however, persistently emphasize body, not as the abject other that, as Butler writes, "presents itself as a signifying lack" that signifies, through absence, the soul (135), but rather as integral to the mystical experience, empowering and sanctifying, signifying the presence of Christ in human flesh. The official representation of Caterina, on the other hand, insistently inscribes gender and its negative stereotypes, while denying body as anything but that which must be

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<sup>1</sup> There is an interesting affinity between my reading of Caterina and the approach recently set forth in Burns's book on women in French medieval literature, *Bodytalk*, which suggests the possibility of hearing "how female voices, fashioned by a male author to represent the misogynous fantasies of female corporeality, can also be heard to rewrite the tales in which they appear" (7). Burns's subject is medieval romance and *fabliau*, where the women are purely fictional constructs, and thus the "bodytalk" methodology remains a critical strategy: "It is not something that authors — consciously or not — make their characters do; rather bodytalk is something that we as feminist readers can choose to hear" (7). In Caterina's case, however, we have a historical woman and a male-authored text, and we can detect real "bodytalk" in the complex interstices between her self-construction and her hagiographic reconstruction.

rejected, tamed, or left behind. This fragmentation of Caterina into woman/saint and body/soul is enacted in the hagiographic and the critical tradition, despite the fundamental self-representation of integrity and correspondence between these aspects in and through Caterina's mystical theology. It is the mystic, Caterina shows us, who can integrate the political, the intellectual, and the spiritual, and who can reconnect the body to the head.

On both sides of Caterina's altar at Siena, flanking the marble tabernacle containing the saint's leathery skull, are muted frescoes by the Renaissance master known as *il Sodoma*, both dating from 1526. To the right of the altar, *il Sodoma* depicts Caterina in ecstasy, rapt out of herself in a mystical vision, with rigid, stigmata-marked hands and uprolled eyes; at her knees is an open book, propped up against a human skull that lies, ignominiously, hardly five feet from the saint's own, real head. To the left of the altar, Caterina kneels in fluid white robes, physically mirroring her pose on the right, but her head is slumped, her eyes are closed, and she is being sustained by two other women in her mystical *svenimento*, a fainting when the self "comes away" from the body. Taken together, the two frescoes and the relic create a triptych that reiterates a representation of the saint as "not there" with respect to the body, as a mystical participant in the divine realm, apt to leave her body behind.

Caterina was indeed a mystic, and one particularly prone to penitential abnegations of the flesh, depriving herself of food, sleep, and warm clothing, burning and lacerating herself in order to subjugate her "perverse self-will"; and it is primarily as an extreme ascetic and ecstatic that she is portrayed by the hagiographic tradition, as inscribed in the official *Vita* written by her last confessor, Raimondo da Capua, ten years after her death by penitence. In Raimondo's narrative, we find an insistently sundered Caterina. From the division of the text between the contemplative phase of her enclosed youth and the charitable activity of her maturity, to the division of her miracles for the salvation of her neighbors' bodies from those for the salvation of their souls, to the insistent assertion that an infusion of grace — not wit or will — animates the female limbs, Raimondo's structure imposes the order of dualism on Caterina's life, severing body from head again and again. Of course, Caterina's body would not be quite so problematic if it were not composed of female flesh; or rather, her "head" would not need to be removed if it were not attached to a female body — particularly the body of a young, uncloistered woman of the urban middle class. Raimondo records (and thus inscribes) the perplexity engendered by the conjunction of Caterina's young, virginal body and her sublime doctrinal knowledge when he writes:

Quod enim cor in tot et tam mirandis donis Altissimi non deficiat, dum cernit hanc virginem seu fragilem, imbecillem aetate, nativitate plebejam, absque humano doctore simul et ductore, tantum apicem



perfectarum ascendisse virtutum, tantam acquisivisse claritatem et perfectionem doctrinae, et hoc totum infra lares paternos?

(§ 5)

(For what heart would not be perplexed by the spectacle of such stupendous graces of the Most High [in seeing this frail virgin, helpless of age, lowly of birth], and yet, without any human teacher or guide, reaching so high a pitch of perfect virtue, and such crystal clarity of sterling doctrine; and all that, too, within the walls of her father's house?)

(Trans. Kearns 4)

Raimondo's hagiographical agenda is governed by the need to mediate between Caterina's life and the audience of her *Life* — explicitly, the ecclesiastical authorities to whom his *Vita* is an appeal for Caterina's canonization. Hagiography is by definition a set of literary topoi and generic paradigms, and in the fourteenth century these conventions were growing more exigent as the canonization process was becoming more carefully regulated, and as the character of the spiritual life was changing from traditional models (Kieckhefer; Kemp). Raimondo's Caterina is humble, obedient, patient, virginal, highly ascetic, contemplative, charitable, and doctrinally impeccable, just as a female saint should be. Those aspects of her life which elude traditional models of gender or sanctity — or, even more problematically, those which throw conventions of gender and sanctity against one another — trouble Raimondo's project, and necessitate certain narrative strategies for their satisfactory incorporation into the figure of Santa Caterina. Doctrinal perfection, for example, in an unschooled young woman who lives not in a cloister among the more educated virgins of the upper classes, but rather in the bustling mercantile household of a dyer, is cause for "perplexity" and could indeed be cause for alarm, particularly in light of the heretical tendencies of lay spirituality with which the Dominicans had had to contend in the fourteenth century. But Raimondo allays these fears by assuring his audience that Caterina's doctrine comes not from her own mind, nor indeed from anyone in her questionable sphere of life, but rather directly from Christ himself:

. . . nolens dimittere ovem tam nobilem absque pastore vel duce, discipulamque tam diligentem et aptam absque perfecto magistro, non hominem, non Angelum, sed seipsum sponsae suae dilectae dedit in praeceptorem.

(§84)

(He could not continue any longer to leave his chosen lamb without a shepherd's guidance, or to leave so apt and diligent a pupil without an expert master. The Teacher he chose for her was neither man nor angel but his own self.)

(Trans. Kearns 77)

The miracle of Caterina's doctrinal perfection is predicated upon the assumption that Caterina is, in fact, an unlearned young woman, an assumption Raimondo goes a long way to inculcate in his audience.<sup>2</sup> But his own narrative contradicts him, and so he must account for all of Caterina's knowledge by recourse to divine intervention. When Raimondo asserts that "She had come to know entirely by revelation the doings and the way of life of the Holy Fathers of Egypt and was on fire with the wish to imitate them" (§ 33) or that "She came to know, by a revelation of the Lord, that our blessed Father Dominic had founded the Order of Friars Preachers" (§ 38), the claims strike a different chord than those which assure that all Caterina's doctrine comes directly from God. The lives of the Desert Fathers and of St. Dominic — in the shadow of whose church Caterina grew up — represent the currency of a cultural literacy to which even a Christian child would have been exposed, and not some theological arcana. While it is certainly noteworthy that Caterina, at the age of six, sought to imitate the ascetic and eremitical lives of the Desert Fathers, took a vow of virginity at age seven, and decided she must join the widow's lay order of Dominican Mantellate while she was still a child, nevertheless it seems excessive for Raimondo to claim that her very *knowledge* of these ways of life (rather than her desire to follow them) came through divine revelation. But these episodes form part of Raimondo's steady project of removing from his Caterina all traces of intellectual independence or agency — all she knows she learns from God, passively and perfectly.<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, one important and pertinent exception: when God teaches Caterina to read Latin. Raimondo explains that Caterina had tried to learn Latin in a conventional fashion, but her attempts were completely futile, and so she turned to prayer (the efficacy of which is a doctrinal lynchpin for both Raimondo and Caterina):

. . . scire te, lector, volo, quod virgo haec sacra litteras quidem sciebat,

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<sup>2</sup> In his first Prologue, he notes that "hanc abundantiam gratiarum in sexu fragiliori, videlicet femineo" is a sign that his age lives in "periculosus temporibus" when men have grown so proud and "inflati" that they can only be set right "per humilem sanctarum puellarum" like Caterina (§4), a topos of inversion that recalls the dynamic at the heart of the stories of many virgin martyrs, and which is then reiterated by the words of both Christ (§122) and Pope Urban VI (§ 334), as reported by Raimondo. Caterina is thus shown to be an instrument of God, chosen precisely because she is a "weak, ignorant woman," to confound the powerful and sinful men of her age.

<sup>3</sup> At the same time, however, Raimondo emphasizes, particularly around the childhood episodes, the tenacity with which, once she had gleaned her spiritual destiny from God, Caterina pursued that destiny despite the extreme (and demonically inflected) resistance of her mother and, more generally, her culture — "obstinately set on making her keep to the beaten path that suits the common run of men" (§ 80). Caterina's triumphs over this resistance constitute a stock, but also rather realistic, aspect of the *Vita*, and bring to life the childhood version of that willful "I" found in the letters Caterina wrote later in life.

sed eas homine viatore docente nequaquam didicerat: et dico litteras, non quod sciret loqui Latinum, sed scivit legere litteras et proferre. . . . Mira res, et divinae virtutis manifestum indicium! Antequam de oratione surgeret, ita divinitus est edocta, quod postquam ab ipsa surrexit, omnem scivit litteram legere, tam velociter et expedite, sicut quicumque doctissimus. Quod ego ipse dum fui expertus, stupebam: potissime propter hoc, quod inveni, quia cum velocissime legeret, si jubebatur syllabicare, in nullo sciebat aliquid dicere; imo vix litteras *b* cognoscebat: quod aestimo pro signo miraculi ordinatum a Domino tunc fuisse.

(§ 113)

(I want you, reader, to know that this holy virgin knew her letters, though she had [by no means] learned them from any teacher numbered among those [of] this world. I purposely say she "knew her letters," for I do not mean that she could speak Latin, but that she could read and pronounce the Latin words when she saw them in written form. . . . Wonderful to relate, God granted this sign of his divine power. Before she rose from prayer she had been taught by God himself. She rose up, and she could ever after read any written words with the speed and accuracy of the most accomplished scholar. When I saw that she could do this I was dumbfounded; especially because, as I discovered, whilst she could read off words with the greatest rapidity, if one asked her to read them syllable by syllable she was incapable of doing so; and as for single letters, she could hardly identify one of them. To my mind, this was God's way of showing the miraculous nature of her gift.)

(Trans. Kearns 104-05)

In this case, the *imperfection* of Caterina's knowledge marks it as divine, and assures Raimondo's audience that the Caterina who reads is not really, or not only, Caterina. That Caterina did read, and was indeed known as "una grande lettrice," is attested to in the popular tradition represented by the *Miracoli*, written by an Anonimo Fiorentino who notes that "tutto l'altro tempo del dì . . . ispende . . . in leggere libri santi" (Getto 30). Il Sodoma, too, represents a reading Caterina, but Raimondo, apart from this incident, emphatically does not. The implicit importance of this advance, and its narrative necessity at this point in the *Vita*, are however suggested by the fact that the episode which follows it represents the central turning point in Caterina's life: the mystical espousal to Christ which takes her out of her father's house and into the world, and which moves Raimondo from the first part of his *Life* to the second.

Caterina and Christ are married by the Virgin Mother in the presence of John the Evangelist, Paul, Saint Dominic, and the Prophet David with his harp. In Raimondo's version of the vision, Christ places on Caterina's finger "annulum . . . aureum, habentem in circulo suo quatuor margaritas, ac adamantinam gemmam superpulcherrimam, etiam sua summitate inclusam" (§115) ("a gold ring set with four pearls and surmounted by a splendid diamond")



[trans. Kearns 107]). The ring remains on her finger even after the vision fades, and for the rest of her life it is there, but visible to her alone. On the effigy at Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, the ring is fully manifest, but rather than a diamond it bears a red stone that seems to allude to the way Caterina herself saw Christ's wedding band. As she makes clear in a letter to Giovanna, Queen of Naples, the ring she wears is not made of metals or stones, however precious:

O dolcissimo amore Gesù, in segno che tu l'avevi presa [la natura umana] per sposa, in capo degli otto dì tu le donasti l'anello della santissima e dolcissima carne tua nel tempo della santa circuncisione! Così sapete voi, venerabile madre mia, che 'n capo degli otto dì se gli levò tanta carne quanto uno cerchio d'anello. . . . Attendete, che 'l fuoco della divina carità ci à donato l'anello non d'oro, ma della purissima carne sua. . . .

(Dupré-Theseider # 39, *Epistolario* 158-59)<sup>4</sup>

This image of being wed with the ring of Christ's circumcised foreskin is apparently uniquely Caterina's (Dupré-Theseider, *Epistolario* 158 n. 4), and can be found also in her letter to Suor Bartolomea della Seta, to whom Caterina writes: "Ben vedi tu che tu sei sposa, e che egli t'ha sposata, e te e ogni creatura; e non con anello d'argento, ma con anello della carne sua" (Tommaseo #221, *Lettere* III 337). Writing to another Mantellata, Caterina di Scetto, Caterina similarly implies that all humankind is espoused to the Son of God through his flesh, and again she concretizes this Christological commonplace in the unique and synthetic vision of the ring of circumcised *carne*: "Vedi bene, che il Figliuolo di Dio tutti ci sposò nella circoncisione, quando si tagliò la carne sua, dandoci quanto una stremità d'anello, in segno che voleva sposare l'umana generazione" (Tommaseo #50, *Lettere* I 236). As Caroline Bynum notes with reference to the paradoxical relation between Caterina's own extreme asceticism and her vision of the redemptive quality of Christ's flesh, "hateful as body may have been to Catherine, it was *body* that she saw as uniting us to the body of God" (175). Raimondo, however, elides this positive valuation of the flesh, and figures the body only as something to be tamed and overcome. He focuses on Caterina's extreme penitential practices and eliminates the somatic empowerment she finds in the suffering body of Christ, as symbolized by the ring of the circumcision, which Raimondo similarly elides.

In this particular case, it may be pudor or doctrinal caution or Raimondo's

<sup>4</sup> The letter, dated 4 August, 1375, by Dupré-Theseider, Fawtier (*Double* 245), and Noffke, is #143 in Tommaseo's edition, but there "carne" is replaced by "mano" in an erasure of the flesh, and of its transcendent significance to Caterina, which parallels (or perhaps follows) Raimondo's own. Dupré-Theseider's critical edition of the letters is unfortunately incomplete, though Susan Noffke, who has translated into English the first and only volume completed by Dupré-Theseider before his death, is continuing his project.

own feelings about body which cause him to silence the graphic reality of Caterina's wedding ring, but it is certainly not narrative coherence. For Caterina's own experience of the marriage to Christ symbolically and mystically bridges her old and new lives much more effectively than Raimondo's merely chronological and desomaticized version. Caterina's marriage with the foreskin suggests a graphic gendering of the moment that links the miraculous learning to read which precedes it and the command of Christ which follows it: "Age igitur, filia, viriliter amodo, absque cunctatione quacumque" ("Therefore, daughter, act manfully from now on, and without any hesitation" §115). Caterina is instructed to go into the world to save souls and face life in the public eye, and Raimondo notes that such a life is "ultra ceterarum mulierum consuetudinem" ("beyond the normal habits of other women") but that her grace will allow her to proceed "audacius et virilius" ("with greater boldness and manliness" §116). Suddenly, Caterina's power extends beyond the walls of her own house to Christendom at large, and her mystical espousal is cast as justifying, or authorizing, this transgression of gender expectations. But the "masculinizing" resonances of becoming a reader, and the phallic link between that event and the entry into the (male) public sphere are silenced by Raimondo, who makes Caterina's literacy passive and miraculous, eliminates the innovation of her mystical marriage, and goes on specifically to recast her new, public role in the feminized terms of mother and bride in the opening of Part 2 of the *Vita*. The foreskin-ring, however, mystically endows Caterina with the phallic power she takes on as a reader and a public figure, and suggests the powerful symbolic coherence of Caterina's self-construction as Santa Caterina — a coherence Raimondo seems loath to reproduce in its gendered, somatic aspects.

The second part of Raimondo's text is dedicated to Caterina's work healing the bodies and souls of her neighbors, but it almost completely elides the political healing she attempted to effect in her strife-ridden country and church. While the split between contemplative youth and active adulthood is amenable to traditional female paradigms of sanctity, political activity escapes the template of the female saint, indeed subverts it, for patience, humility, and obedience are not the apparent virtues of a strident agitator for ecclesiastical reform, such as Caterina often shows herself to be in her letters. And the active life constituted by tending the plague-struck masses differs significantly from that implied by supporting a youth accused of treason by being with him at his very public execution. Such an incident is the subject of one of Caterina's most oft-cited letters (Dupré-Theseider #31; Tommaseo #273) written to Raimondo in the summer of 1375, not long after Caterina, having travelled to Pisa to preach the crusade and work against the break between the Italian republics and the papacy, received the imprint of Christ's stigmata, which were, like her wedding ring, the marks of her special and very somatic relationship to Christ, and visible only to her. While Raimondo recounts the receiving of the stigmata (§199), he does not

discuss the execution, which is, however, mentioned in the "abridgement" of Raimondo's *Vita* known as the *Leggenda Minor*, translated into the vernacular by one of Caterina's disciples, Ranieri Pagliaresi. The *Leggenda Minor* identifies the anonymous man whose execution Caterina's letter describes as "uno gentile uomo perugino, che aveva nome Niccolò di Toldo, el quale per alcuna parola che incautamente aveva detta, che toccava lo Stato, fu data sentenza d'essere dicapitato" (Grottanelli 93). It is the execution of Niccolò di Tuldo that provides the subject of the third fresco by il Sodoma that adorns the Caterinian chapel at San Domenico, and in it the sundering of Caterina is once again symbolically figured, in all its violence.

The fresco is on the chapel's left wall, and its color and large-scale action contrast quite sharply with the intimate and static images of Caterina's raptures that flank the altar — indeed the juxtaposition almost seems to reproduce the contrast between the two parts of Raimondo's *Vita*. Depicted is a crowd of soldiers and angels witnessing a scene of execution, at the bottom center of which lies the twisted body of the condemned, his torso tipped towards the viewer to display the blood gushing from his severed neck. His head is held aloft by a white-robed figure while Caterina, also robed in white, mirrors the upward glance of the severed head with her own supplicating eyes, which are fixed on the tiny white soul the angels, thanks to her intercession, are escorting heavenwards. The visual analogy between Caterina's glance and that of the severed head suggests that Caterina, too, sees with the eyes of a head no longer anchored to its body, and witnesses the triumphal scene in heaven while everyone else is focused on the writhing, truncated corpse. The decapitated body, bare and muscular and eminently physical, and thus the symbol of Body, is shown to be that which must be left behind in order for Soul to ascend; similarly, Caterina, except for her vivid gaze, seems frail and nearly featureless, almost already disembodied. Her letter, however, once again shows embodiment as indispensable to salvation, just as does the physical assimilation to Christ through the sharing of his five wounds. And the symbolic coherence of Caterina's mystical experience is found in the image that connects the execution to the stigmata: the blood, which flows so abundantly in the letter to Raimondo.

When Caterina catches the young man's severed head in her lap, she is covered in blood whose smell is ineffably sweet — it is the blood of the slaughtered lamb, in which she repeatedly exhorts her correspondents to bathe themselves, to dress themselves, and to drown themselves. The blood induces a mystical vision of the man's soul entering into Christ's lacerated side: "nella bottiga aperta del costato suo [di Cristo] . . . bagnato nel sangue suo, che valeva per lo sangue del Figliuolo di Dio!" (*Epistolario* 131). The conflation of the young man's blood and Christ's, and the interchangeability of their suffering, encapsulates Caterina's pervasive theology of blood in a grammatical ambiguity: the soul of the executed man enters Christ's side bathed "nel sangue suo" — his blood, which is at once the man's and the God-in-Man's, as Caterina asserts by



claiming their equivalence. The blood of Caterina's stigmata can be seen to partake of the same redemptive ambiguity. As Bynum notes, "Catherine's craving for blood was not merely a craving for encounter in Christ with all that was denied her socially and politically: the chalice, the power of the clergy, the political arena. She also craved blood because she craved identification with the humanity of Christ, and she saw this humanity as physicality" (178). Like the foreskin with which humanity is wedded to Christ, the blood links the luridly literalized flesh, in all its suffering fragility, directly and inextricably to the transcendent realm.

The mystical progression from bride of Christ wed in the flesh, to physical mirror of the suffering flesh itself, is enacted by Caterina over the course of several years and parallels her progress from the cloister of her father's house into the political arena, where she became particularly active after 1375. The shift also indicates Caterina's increasing perception of her own suffering, at her own hands — that is, in her penitential practices — but also at the hands of those who "persecute" her with criticism and disbelief, questioning her orthodoxy and her sanctity.<sup>5</sup> The move from Christ's bride to his body indicates the increasingly somatic nature of Caterina's mystical theology, her ever more radical focus on Christ's lacerated flesh and on its imitation. While this progression is discernible in the narrative of Raimondo's *Vita*, its most potent imagery and implications are obscured again with the erasure of the incident of the execution, which, like the image of the foreskin, provides such a succinct vision of Caterina's symbolic enmeshing of physicality and spirituality, of the inner and the outer, of body and head. The culmination of this pattern is found in yet another incident which Raimondo chooses to elide from his representation of Caterina, but which is, like the execution, reported to him by Caterina in a letter.

This letter, known as #272 (Tommaseo, *Lettere* IV 199-216)<sup>6</sup> was written by Caterina on the 10th or 11th of October, 1377 (Fawtier, *Essai* I 198), when she had gone to the Rocca d'Orcia, about forty kilometers southeast of Siena, to

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<sup>5</sup> The question of whether Caterina was actually submitted to a doctrinal examination by the Dominican Order, as a result of which Raimondo was assigned as her confessor in 1374, has been debated. See Petroff 239, Meattini's Introduction to the *Dialogo*, Noffke's Introduction to her translation of the *Letters*, Kearns's Introduction to his translation of Raimondo's *Life*. In any case, it is clear from Caterina's own letters that she felt there were many who questioned and impugned her sanctity and her way of life.

<sup>6</sup> Tommaseo places the letter to Raimondo about the execution after this one on the basis of the mention, in letter #272, of an unnamed person for whose plight Caterina is concerned, which Tommaseo connects to the young man for whose last-minute conversion before his execution Caterina is responsible in letter #273. The textual criticism of Fawtier and Dupré-Theseider has shown that the letters are actually separated by two years, but their rapprochement by Tommaseo highlights the mystical progression I am suggesting. The letter is not found in the first, and only, volume of Dupré-Theseider's chronologically organized critical edition.

mediate a dispute between two brothers of the powerful Salimbeni family. It is one of Caterina's longest letters, and it contains in microcosm the format of the mystical dialogue and four petitions found in her *Libro*, on which she began to work shortly after the trip to Rocca d'Orcia. It is also a rhetorical tour-de-force: framed by Caterina's personal addresses to Raimondo, it contains what amount to ten sermons, preached by the voices of all three persons of the Trinity, each in perfect conformity with the format of the classical oratorical *inventio* (Papka 4). The themes of these sermons range from ecclesiastical politics and the need for clerical reform, to the Last Judgment, to the state of Raimondo's own soul. But when the visionary dialogue has drawn to a close, Caterina emerges from her mystical disguise as the anonymous "serva di Dio" to whom the vision is ascribed, and writes to her confessor:

Abbate compassione della miserabile figliuola, che vive in tanto stento per tanta offesa di Dio, e non ha con cui sfogarsi; se non che lo Spirito Santo m'ha provveduto dentro da me con la clemenzia sua, e di fuore m'ha provveduto di spassarmi con lo scrivere. . . . Questa lettera, e un'altra ch'io vi mandai, ho scritto di mia mano in su l'Isola della Rocca, con molti sospiri e abbondanza di lagrime; in tanto che l'occhio, vedendo, non vedeva; ma piena d'ammirazione ero di me medesima, e della bontà di Dio . . . la quale abbondava verso di me, che per refrigerio, essendo privata della consolazione, la quale per mia ignoranza io non cognobbi, m'aveva dato, e provveduto con darmi l'attitudine dello scrivere . . . per ammirabile modo me la fermò nella mente mia, siccome fa il maestro al fanciullo, che gli da lo esemplo.

(Lettere IV 215-16)

Caterina's usually fluid syntax becomes hesitant as she tells her confessor that this letter, and a previous one she has sent, were written "by her hand" rather than dictated, for the Holy Spirit has had pity on her loneliness and taught her "the attitude [the physical exercise] of writing" in which, as she says in closing, "le mani e la lingua s'accordano al cuore."<sup>7</sup> Her stress on the physical aspect of

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<sup>7</sup> As Fawtier notes, nowhere in his text does Raimondo show Caterina "capable de tenir la plume" (I 134); however, several witnesses in the canonization process attest to Caterina's miraculous literacy including both reading and writing, as does Caffarini in his abridged version of Raymond's text (Fawtier I 4-5). Fawtier's contempt for Caffarini and the other "artisans de la canonization" (361) leads him into somewhat paranoid speculations about the manipulations of the letters, possibly including the forgery of #272 (198) to san(ct)itize any problematic aspects of Caterina's spirituality or behavior. But, as Noffke notes, "his arguments are unconvincing" (12), and she, as well as Meattini (editor of the *Dialogo*), Ferroni, and an increasing number of contemporary *studiosi cateriniani* have opted to take Caterina at her word. (In fact, no one but Fawtier seems seriously to doubt the authenticity of the letter.) Indeed, it seems much more logical to argue that the suppression by Raimondo of Caterina's ability to write, and the exclusion of letter #272 from editions of the epistolary which appeared before her canonization in 1461 (see tables in Fawtier I),

writing and on the union of body and mind it entails seems directly to negate Raimondo's fragmenting characterization in the *Vita* of Caterina's "writing" as divinely infused dictation. Of her letters, sent throughout Christendom to people of all stations, he notes the surprisingly high style in which they are written, and the profound *sententia* they contain, in contrast to their composition in the vernacular and through oral dictation, and cites this paradox as evidence for their supernatural genesis.

Quamvis enim proprio sermone vulgari loquatur in eis, quia non cognovit litteraturam: quia tamen introivit in potentias Domini cum clavi profunditatis profundae, stylus ejus (si quis diligenter advertit) potius videtur Pauli quam Catherinae, melius alicujus Apostoli quam cujuscumque puellae. Has autem epistolas ita dictabat velociter absque cogitationis intervallo etiam modico, quasi legeret in aliquo libro ante se posito quidquid dicebat. . . . Aliquando tribus, aliquando quatuor scriptoribus similiter dictaverat, ut dictum est, et cum eadem celeritate, necnon et memoriae firmitate; quod in corpore muliebri, tam macerato vigiliis et inedia, potius dat mihi signum miraculi et infusionis supercaelestis, quam cujuscumque naturalis virtutis.

(§ 7)

(True, she knew not the language of learning, and therefore she composed [her letters] in her own spoken vernacular; but she had penetrated the mighty deeds of the Lord, using for this purpose the key of his deep abyss; and her style, in consequence, when one studies it, is found to be rather that of a Paul than of a Catherine. It is such as one would look for from one of the Apostles themselves rather than from an unknown young woman. She used to dictate those letters of hers with such rapidity, without the slightest pause to take thought, that one would have fancied she was reading out her words from a book lying open before her.... She would sometimes dictate in this way to three secretaries, and sometimes even to four, with equal rapidity and sureness of concentration. To me the existence of such a capacity in that weak woman's body of hers, worn out as it was by vigils and fasting, was a sign that it was miraculous and supernatural, and no mere natural talent.)

(Trans. Kearns 7)

Of her *Libro*, or *Dialogo*, Raimondo similarly expresses how unbelievable it is that it was written by a woman, and makes explicit the sort of divine ventriloquy only suggested with respect to the letters: "Insuper si quis inspiciat librum, quem Spiritu sancto manifeste dictante, composuit in idiomate proprio; quis possit imaginari aut credere illum factum per feminam?" (§ 8) ("If we turn

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would have served the purposes of the "artisans de la canonization" by allowing Caterina to fit less problematically into the hagiographic mold of the "unlearned young woman."



next to the Book which she composed in her own vernacular, manifestly at the dictation of the Holy Spirit, who could imagine or believe it was the work of a woman?" [trans. Kearns 7]). The answer, of course, is that it is not the work of a woman, but of the Holy Spirit, who dictates through Caterina; she in turn "numquam dictavit dum utebatur corporeis sensibus; sed semper dum actualiter in ecstasi posita" (§8) ("never dictated . . . when she was in normal possession of her bodily senses, but only when she was rapt in ecstasy" [trans. Kearns 7]). The proof of this literal inspiration — which again removes the "head" from the body — is that Caterina's texts display a "stylus altissimus" (§ 8), a rhetorical sophistication which could not possibly be the work of an unlearned young woman, but which is clearly in evidence in the text of letter #272.

The tendency of minimizing Caterina's own intellectual powers by endowing them with an essentially miraculous genesis supplies to the figure of Raimondo's Santa Caterina something which Caterina Benincasa herself avoids: the claim, made by many medieval women writers, that they are no more than the frail, passive, and ignorant vessels through which flows the word of God (Ferrante; Petroff). This type of assertion is generally discussed under the rubric of the "modesty" or "humility" topos, which can be found in male writers as well, and which rhetorically disposes the writer's audience to be charitable to one who asserts his basic unworthiness to treat lofty, complex subject matter. The feminine version of the trope adds an acknowledgment of the essential misogyny of the clerical sphere while simultaneously attempting to dispell negative preconceptions of the *verba mulieris*. The tradition is a long and inherently paradoxical one, as the tenth-century Christian playwright Hrotsvita of Gandersheim suggests when in the preface to her dramas she explains that the more limited the female intellect is believed to be, the more God will be praised as the giver of her talent — a formula which essentially eliminates the possibility for criticism while appearing eminently self-effacing. Hildegard of Bingen, a woman of vast knowledge and considerable power, refers to herself as "ego paupercula feminea forma" — "[I,] a poor little figure of a woman" (Newman 2); and Caterina's contemporary, the English recluse Julian of Norwich, suggests the dangers of writing from that position when, in the sixth chapter of the short text of her *Showings*, she writes:

But God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not and never was my intention; for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail. But I know very well that what I am saying I have received by the revelation of him who is the sovereign teacher. . . . But because I am a woman, ought I therefore to believe that I should not tell you of the goodness of God, when I saw at that same time that it is his will that it be known?"

(135)

Julian here expresses the double-bind of medieval women's mysticism: her

visions command her to tell the world what she has seen and heard, but her society severely limits a woman's right to speak, and indeed completely forbids a woman to teach on spiritual matters, in accord with the words of Paul in the first epistle to Timothy: "mulier in silentio discat cum omni subiectione, docere autem mulieri non permitto neque dominari in virum sed esse in silentio" ("Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men but to keep silent") (1 Tim. 2:11-12). To be a woman writer in the Middle Ages is in itself a transgressive act. As Danielle Régnier-Bohler points out, "Occuper le territoire de l'écrit est pour la femme au Moyen Âge une grande entreprise, accompagnée de la conscience d'une effraction ou d'une audace, d'une timidité liée à l'incapacité du sexe" (450). When the act of writing is also the enunciation of a social, political, and/or ecclesiastical critique, as the writings of medieval women so frequently are, the "effraction" — the "break-in" into the sphere of the masculine — is all the more dangerous, and the penalties for "getting caught" can be fatally high. Régnier-Bohler asks, then, "Où et comment se cache la femme lettrée?" (450). The question — where and how does the medieval woman of letters hide herself? — is answered by the voice from Heaven that tells Hildegard how to relate her visions at the beginning of her *Scivias*:

O fragile human, ashes of ashes, and filth of filth. Say and write what you see and hear. But since you are timid in speaking, and simple in expounding, and untaught in writing, speak and write these things not by a human mouth, and not by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition, but as you see and hear them on high in the heavenly places in the wonders of God.

(59)

The audacity of usurping the male prerogative of writing is minimized by the assertions of women mystics that their writing occupies another sphere, one for which they, as women, are not directly responsible; they "hide" by speaking and writing outside of the conventions of the human — "not by a human mouth, not by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition" (59). The female mystic thus sets up her utterance as Other to the male signifying order — not competing with or constrained by it, nominally non-threatening but in fact asserting absolute power.<sup>8</sup> She erases herself to allow a nearly unmediated transmission of the divine — and indeed this is the mystical paradigm, "l'expérience directe et passive de la présence de Dieu"

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<sup>8</sup> The mystical writing of medieval women, Petroff writes, is often characterized as "emotional (concerned with affective responses), repetitive, proverbial, nonanalytical; the language is concrete rather than abstract, subjective, timeless, ahistorical; thoughts are connected by *and* or *then* rather than being subordinated to each other" — a series of attributes associated, as Ong proposes, with oral expression, and contrasted to learned, written, male discourse (28-29).

(Deblaere, col. 1902); but the epistemological paradox of the mystical text is that it precisely cannot be a "direct and passive experience of the presence of God," but only its representation. The rhetoric of mystical presence is a rhetoric, an essentially conscious and convention-bound compositional technique that seeks to convey the effect of mystical immediacy. Thus Marguerite d'Oingt explains in her thirteenth-century *Pagina meditationum*:

I thought that the hearts of men and women are so flighty that they can hardly ever remain in one place, and because of that I fixed in writing the thoughts that God had ordered into my heart so that I would not lose them when I removed them from my heart, and so that I could think them over little by little whenever God would give me His grace. And for that reason I ask all those who read this text not to think badly [of me] because I had the presumption to write this, since you must believe that I have no sense or learning with which I would know how to take these things from my heart, nor could I write this down without any other model [exemplar] than the grace of God which is working within me.

(26)

As with Hildegard's "not by human mouth," Marguerite's removal of these "things of God" from her heart suggests an aspect of this topos that goes beyond the issue of humility or literal "inspiration": it is a disembodiment of female language, a distancing of the word from the flesh, another figurative (auto)decapitation which is also the "annihilation of self" of which Simone de Beauvoir speaks. She connects this hallmark of the woman in love with the divine to the ecstatic state, for "Ecstasy mimics corporeally that abolition of the ego; the subject neither sees nor feels any longer, the body is forgotten, denied" (749). This denial of the (female) body is the prerequisite, in the examples I have just cited, for what Irigaray sees in women's mysticism: that "this is the only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly" (191). In order for woman to speak publicly, particularly while the Pauline injunction is still so resonant, as in the Middle Ages, she must doubly "decapitate" herself, not only removing the spirit from the flesh, but also putting God where her head should be, and thus rhetorically erasing the woman as a whole. But while Caterina did experience mystical ecstasies, and did speak and act publicly, she does not make the rhetorical connection between the two through self-annihilation, as Raimondo would have it, but rather through somaticized assimilation to Christ.

In Caterina's 373 letters, and in her long mystical treatise, the claim of being a weak, ignorant woman is conspicuously absent, suggesting, perhaps, that she was in fact "unlearned" enough not to be aware of the conventions of the genre in which she wrote. Perhaps. But she was certainly not unaware of the deep distrust of women that pervaded her culture. Rather than conform to its



tropes, however, Caterina circumvented the very misogyny that necessitated such postures by entirely eschewing reference to herself as a woman, while at the same time emphasizing her embodied state. In a way that is characteristic of her dealings with the obstacles presented to her by the world, Caterina rearticulates its categories away from gender and towards God, in whose hierarchy there are only three levels, according to her implicit and explicit theology: animal — human — divine. Those who order their lives toward God are his “true servants” and thus fully human, in a humanity ennobled and redeemed by Christ’s; those who fail to do so are animals; these are her only distinctions. While Caterina uses the conventional associations of gender in her exhortations and predications — as when she begs Raimondo to be “virile” and not to shame her before God by being a “woman” (in letter #272) — she does not apply those gendered categories to herself. Nevertheless, the “self” of Caterina is far from “annihilated” in her writings. As Giulio Ferroni notes:

Caterina manifesta i propri inviti e le proprie esortazioni con un uso insistente dell'imperativo e con il ritorno quasi formulare del verbo volere alla prima persona del presente (*Voglio che . . . ; Ma io voglio . . .*), a cui subentrano spesso formule affini che oscillano dalla preghiera alla coercizione, ma che comunque partono sempre dall'impulso fortissimo del soggetto.

(15)

Caterina’s will may be completely subsumed by the will of God to which she has, with such hard work, conformed it, but it is nonetheless her will, and her desire, which she expresses in her letters. The mystical state of union is the prerequisite for her writing, but her writing itself does not display the abolition of the “I” Irigaray describes: “yearning for even greater abandon, the “I” is empty still, ever more empty, opening wide in rapture of soul” (195) and “Always without consciousness” (199). For Caterina the mystical experience is not an end in itself, but rather the locus of her empowering reassurances, of the confirmation of her will, her self, her consciousness. It is the mystical experience of ever greater identification with the body of Christ that, as we have seen, allows her to write “Al nome di Gesù Cristo crocifisso e . . . nel sangue suo,” as she states in the formulaic opening to all her letters. And in letter #272, her assertion of her new status as writer comes only after she has fully assimilated herself to Christ by literally speaking his voice and conflating it with her own, within the mystical dialogue contained in the letter, when she writes of those who are not “true servants” such as she exhorts Raimondo to be:

Il sangue sparto per voi vi manifesta che questo è la verità. Ma essi, accecati per lo proprio amore che hanno di loro, si scandalizzano con molta impazienza, giudicando in male, e in loro danno e ruina e in odio, quello che io fo per amore e per loro bene, per privarli delle pene

eternali, e per guadagno della loro vita eterna. Perché dunque si lagnano di me, e odiano quello che debbone avere in reverenzia? e vogliono giudicare gli occulti miei giudizi, i quali sono tutti diritti? . . . Non si fidano di me, che non voglio altro che la loro sanctificazione. . . . E sempre si scandalizzano in me; e io con pazienza gli porto e li sostengo, perché io li amai senza essere amato da loro.

*(Lettere IV 212-214)*

Caterina sees her suffering, like Christ's, as redemptive not only for herself but for others, and thus constructs her sanctity as specifically residing in her body, through which that suffering is performed. Indeed, Caterina can be seen as "performing" sanctity on the surface of the body, emphasizing that from which most female writers of the Middle Ages feel they must distance themselves in order to speak publicly. For Caterina, it is the body, in its mystical and essentially androgynous assimilation with that of Christ, that precisely empowers public action and public expression. While Caroline Bynum has convincingly demonstrated that late-medieval religiosity was increasingly somatic, Raimondo's silencing of the speaking female body — or rather his insistence that it is precisely not the woman herself who speaks through that body — shows that the sundered woman remained, even at the end of the fourteenth century, a much more acceptable textual construct than the integrated person Caterina strives to be. But the final irony may be that it was precisely Caterina's conflation of the binaries of active and contemplative, woman and saint, mystic and author, body and head, that led her to be the only writing woman of the fourteenth century to achieve full canonization. That Caterina writes because of, and not despite, her body suggests that indeed she also writes her body as she creates her own text, Santa Caterina. And that Caterina as writing body is excluded from the hagiographical representation of Santa Caterina denies the fact that this, really, is all that remains. Apart from that severe, severed head.

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## Lettere di Caterina da Siena. Il testo, la tradizione, l'interpretazione

**L**e *Lettere di Caterina da Siena*, opera che la storiografia letteraria colloca oggi tra i "classici" della tradizione italiana,<sup>1</sup> conservano nel loro insieme i segni di un complesso itinerario di frontiera — tra oralità e scrittura; eresia e ortodossia; femminile e maschile; immagine di sé e modello femminile — che io ritengo debbano essere assunti come segmenti di storia del testo e dell'intellettualità femminile, e riproposti, nella loro vitale ed irrisolta ambiguità, come questioni di metodo strettamente attinenti alla lettura e all'interpretazione dell'opera.

Le 383 lettere dettate o scritte da Caterina nell'arco di dieci anni (probabilmente a partire dal 1370) per essere inviate a destinatari diversi (per sesso, età, appartenenza, stato sociale), si sono tramandate fino a noi in forma di epistolario:<sup>2</sup> la raccolta delle lettere, avviata per piccoli nuclei, vivente l'autrice, dai suoi discepoli per un uso privato interno alla comunità cateriniana, si definisce nella struttura di testo in due tempi. Il primo, di poco successivo alla morte di Caterina, porta ad un numero consistente di raccolte, non più private, ma di carattere pubblico e con una finalità di tipo edificante. Il secondo, che coincide con la raccolta Caffarini (frate Tommaso di Antonio, discepolo di Caterina) dell'inizio del secolo XV, consegna alla tradizione a stampa le fonti manoscritte, organizzate in due parti (lettere ad ecclesiastici; lettere a persone di condizione laica), mentre avvia l'uso pubblico della figura e dell'opera cateriniane, potenziato in anni di poco successivi dal processo Castellano e confermato, nel 1461, dal processo di canonizzazione.<sup>3</sup> L'edizione a stampa

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<sup>1</sup> Alludo al loro inserimento tra le opere presentate nella *Letteratura italiana* Einaudi: Zancan M., *Lettere di Caterina da Siena*, saggio a cui rimando per un'analisi complessiva del testo e per la bibliografia critica ragionata.

<sup>2</sup> Caterina da Siena, *Le lettere* (1966) a cura e con Prefazione di Meattini U., Milano 1987<sup>4</sup>: tutte le citazioni nel testo sono da questa edizione.

<sup>3</sup> Per la storia del testo sono fondamentali: Dupré Theseider E., *Il problema critico delle lettere di santa Caterina da Siena. Introduzione* in ID., *Epistolario di Santa Caterina da Siena XIII-CXI*: si



realizzata da Aldo Manuzio, la seconda nel tempo, ma la più prestigiosa nell'arco di due secoli, codifica nel 1500, anno giubilare, le valenze pubbliche e politiche maturate a Venezia dal culto cateriniano all'inizio del Quattrocento, e le rilancia, come sottolinea la lettera dedicatoria a Francesco Piccolomini, nipote di Pio II, oltre i confini della Repubblica, consentendo che le *Lettere* e, veicolata da esse, l'immagine di Caterina, "se spargano per lo mondo".<sup>4</sup>

Considerate all'interno di quella tradizione che le ha composte in forma di testo (prima di predicazione, poi letterario), le lettere di Caterina si configurano come la materia inerte che ha consentito la nascita di un modello femminile, la cui immagine si è sovrapposta al soggetto originario di scrittura, occultandone i modi di essere, la memoria del corpo, le intenzioni profonde e quelle mondane, la rete reale di riferimenti sociali e culturali. Ma accanto alla storia del testo, incorporata nell'opera fino a diventarne parte costitutiva (in questa forma, infatti, essa ha avuto vita nel tempo attraverso la lettura), la scrittura, se chi legge la interroga in questo senso, conserva i tratti di quel primo itinerario dell'opera che, integrando il pensiero e la scrittura in un percorso di esperienza individuale, presiede alla sua genesi. Lavorare a questa storia sotterranea e occultata del testo significa allora scomporre la forma modellata dalla tradizione per valorizzarne i frammenti in grado di evocare l'identità che la storia ha fissato in immagine. Questo livello di lettura dell'opera sposta l'attenzione dalla raccolta alle lettere, che Caterina (se si escludono quelle inviate dalla Rocca di Tentennano, su cui torneremo) compone oralmente per dettarle ad una figura segretariale che talvolta si palesa nella lettera dopo il protocollo finale: alle figure degli estensori della tradizione manoscritta, dei curatori e degli editori di quella a stampa va dunque premessa una prima figura che si interpone tra la composizione orale del singolo testo e la sua scrittura. La presenza di una scrittura mediata, contraddetta nella raccolta da una lettera che si dichiara come autografa ("Questa lettera, e un'altra ch'io vi mandai, ho scritte di mia mano in su l'Isola della Rocca", 272; 1164), pone allora due quesiti, il primo relativo all'autenticità delle lettere, il secondo pertinente al rapporto reale che lega Caterina alla pratica della scrittura e alle forme della sua tematizzazione all'interno dei testi.

La prima questione, quella relativa all'autenticità dei testi, va considerata in stretto rapporto con la storia del testo stesso: nella prima fase, considerate l'autorevolezza di cui Caterina godeva all'interno della comunità e la possibilità di controllo sulla trascrizione che lei stessa era in grado di esercitare attraverso la lettura, la scrittura del dettato non può che aver portato ad alterazioni minime e del tutto occasionali. Nella seconda fase, avviata dalle raccolte private, la tradizione testuale si fa invece più complessa e presenta un ventaglio di questioni che l'edizione critica — avviata nel 1940 da Dupré Theseider ma rimasta interrotta alla lettera 88 — solo in parte potrà risolvere: se infatti non può che

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tratta dell'introduzione al primo e unico volume dell'edizione critica, comprendente 88 lettere.

<sup>4</sup> *Epistole devotissime de sancta Catharina da Siena*, c.IB.

rimanere irrisolto il quesito relativo alle modalità seguite dai discepoli per la raccolta del materiale, è tuttavia certo che il lavoro di trascrizione o di riscrittura delle lettere ha prodotto elementi non quantificabili né ovviamente emendabili di alterazione delle stesse. Dal confronto con i pochi originali conservati, o con le copie più vicine ad essi, risultano evidenti almeno due interventi di fondo operati sulle lettere in concomitanza con l'avvio di un uso pubblico delle stesse: il primo riguarda la loro integrità, perché la nuova destinazione porta alla caduta di tutte le parti informative o confidenziali, a carattere privato; il secondo ne altera invece la veste linguistica che, nel corso della tradizione del testo, assume i toni, tendenzialmente aulici, della lingua letteraria. Le lettere che noi oggi leggiamo raccolte — secondo un criterio variabile e talvolta arbitrario — in epistolario, composte secondo una struttura costante (protocollo iniziale, corpo centrale, protocollo finale) in una prosa di alta letterarietà (fondo lessicale omogeneo, ritmo costante del periodo) sono dunque l'esito finale di una lunga tradizione di riscrittura: la conservazione del testo, dovuta a finalità totalmente altre dall'intenzione della sua autrice, ne ha determinato elementi di modificazione di natura diversa e impossibili da risalire. Ma tra le righe dei testi riscritti, i frammenti di pensiero che definiscono come autentiche queste lettere non autografe, mentre conservano i grandi temi della mistica cateriniana, consentono di riconoscere nell'immagine fissa di un modello di santità femminile i tratti mobili di una forte figura di donna intellettuale.

Il motivo centrale delle lettere cateriniane è rappresentato dal tema del *perfetto amore*, esperienza strettamente individuale: l'unione fusionale tra sé e Dio che consente, secondo la fede neotestamentaria, a Dio di farsi uomo e all'uomo di farsi Dio, permette a Caterina di ritrovare nella sua natura umana l'essenza divina e di fondare quindi in Dio l'autorevolezza della sua figura e della sua parola. L'esperienza del perfetto amore è veicolata dal *cognoscimento* di sé: "Colui che cognosce sé, cognosce Dio e la bontà di Dio in sé, e però l'ama" (37;1329): l'itinerario cateriniano è dunque un percorso interiore di perfezione che, anziché risolversi nella contemplazione, si cala nell'umano, a imitazione dell'umanità di Dio, e insieme ad esaltazione in sé della propria natura divina. Essa è dunque una esperienza d'eccezione e di elezione, ma nello stesso tempo è anche un percorso tutto umano di costruzione di una forte personalità che, aprendosi al mondo, per operare in esso, si propone a sua volta come modello da imitare.

Figura del perfetto amore è Cristo "Verbo innestato nella nostra umanità", che consente all'uomo di trovare in Dio "la immagine della creatura" e in sé medesimo "Dio in immagine sua" (226;1138). Cristo, "Agnello che coll'amore ineffabile svenò e aperse il corpo suo, dandoci sé in bagno e in medicina e in cibo e in vestimento" (166;999), è il sangue donato dal Dio ebbro in amore: un sangue fecondo, principio di vita, un sangue materno. L'immagine ricorrente del sangue, e quella altrettanto frequente del latte (Cristo ci ha dato "il latte della divina Grazia", e ci tiene "al petto come balia", 260;1034), sembrano dare forma

all'immagine di un Dio dagli attributi materni, il Dio madre e misericordia; e ad un rapporto di filiazione al femminile (figlia-Dio madre) ricorrenti entrambi nella mistica al femminile.<sup>5</sup> In Caterina, la tematica del Dio-madre sottesa alle immagini ripetute di amore materno ("il figliuolo non teme mai d'andare alla madre; . . . e la madre il riceve in braccio, e tiello al petto suo, e notricalo", 105;1200), si dispiega nella bellissima lettera alla badessa di S. Maria degli Scalzi a Firenze, in cui scrive:

Carissima madre in Cristo dolce Gesù. Io Catarina, serva e schiava de' servi di Gesù Cristo, scrivo a voi nel prezioso sangue suo; con desiderio di vedervi fondata in vera carità, accioché siate vera nutrice e governatrice delle vostre percorelle. Bene è vero, che non potremmo nutrire altrui se prima non nutricassimo l'anima nostra di vere e reali virtù: e di virtù non si può notricare se non s'attacca al petto della divina carità, da qual petto si trae il latte della divina dolcezza. A noi, carissima madre, conviene fare come fa il fanciullo, il quale volendo prendere il latte, prende la mammella della madre, e mettesela in bocca; onde col mezzo della carne trae a sé il latte: e così dobbiamo fare noi, se vogliamo notricare l'anima nostra. Perocché ci dobbiamo attaccare al petto di Cristo crocifisso, in cui è la madre della carità; e col mezzo della carne sua trarremo il latte che notrica l'anima nostra e' figliuoli delle virtù: cioè per mezzo dell'umanità di Cristo; perocché nell'umanità cadde, e sostenne, la pena, ma non nella deità.

(86;1081)

Dare a Dio il nome di madre significa tornare all'origine, a quell'armoniosa e amorosa interezza che precede la storia, e lì fondare la propria immagine, di natura umana e insieme divina, in grado di generare e rigenerare la vita, la propria e quella degli altri, fino a comprendere l'umanità intera: dire l'esperienza del perfetto amore significa allora portare nella storia, attraverso le proprie parole, quel verbo divino ascoltato nel profondo del proprio sé. Si delinea, in questi frammenti di pensiero, la questione relativa al valore della parola, al rapporto tra parola detta e parola scritta, e al valore della scrittura.

Dire l'esperienza del perfetto amore, in sé incomunicabile, in un contesto segnato dalla parola vietata, svela l'orgoglio di dire di sé nella storia il proprio sovrumano valore. L'uso della parola mistica allinea la figura di Caterina a quelle figure di donna che, prima di lei, avevano delineato le origini di una tradizione italiana di mistica femminile: Chiara d'Assisi, Margherita da Cortona e Angela da Foligno, francescane; Umiltà da Faenza, vallombrosana; Chiara da Montefalco, agostiniana; Beatrice d'Este, Umiliana Cerchi e Villana de' Botti, laiche; Benvenuta Bojanni, Vanna da Orvieto, Margherita da Città di Castello,

<sup>5</sup> Pozzi G., *L'alfabeto delle sante*, in Pozzi G. e Leonardi C. (a.c.di), *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* 40: testo complessivo a cui si rimanda per un quadro relativo alla tradizione italiana di mistica femminile.



domenicane. Si tratta di donne cresciute in rapporto agli ordini mendicanti, figure di una mistica di impostazione laica, che si apre al mondo; donne le cui parole — disperse nell'oralità o perdute in una scrittura rara, privata e segreta —, hanno alimentato, in una ricca tradizione agiografica, modelli di santità utilizzati, in particolare da domenicani e francescani, come materiali per la predicazione e strumenti di penetrazione tra i laici. Sono donne oggi quasi senza voce, immagini di modelli femminili che si nutrono del valore della loro storia, ma che sovrastano la loro esperienza e le loro parole.

Caterina, oggetto di una educazione religiosa esemplata su questi modelli di santità, destinata a sua volta ad essere nel tempo materia di modelli diversi (la madre della comunità, la combattente per la riforma dei costumi e della Chiesa, il modello femminile di fede e di presenza nel mondo, la santa, la patrona d'Italia) è dunque interna a questa tradizione, ma nello stesso tempo la infrange e la rinnova. Caterina, infatti, mentre sembra aderire al modello di perfezione che il contesto sociale e culturale le propone, in realtà nello stesso tempo lo infrange e lo riformula incarnandolo in sé, con la pretesa, che i suoi testi documentano, di essere lei stessa a predicarlo e a diffonderlo. In questo percorso, il punto di svolta è segnato dalla consapevolezza della potenzialità di valore e di autorevolezza insita nella parola consegnata alla scrittura, testimoniata dall'uso diretto, sistematico e pubblico che Caterina fa della parola e della scrittura. Le lettere di Caterina — rivolte a uomini e donne di ogni ceto o stato sociale —, in cui i temi della mistica si intrecciano ai contenuti della storia e a quelli della politica, sono infatti scritture animate dall'intenzione di intervenire attivamente nella realtà umana e sociale, con la pretesa di modificarla: "con acceso e ardito cuore", scrive a Raimondo da Capua, è necessario "andare a dare l'onore a Dio e la fadiga al prossimo" (226; 1139). La parola di Caterina è, dunque, una parola pubblica che in sé, per la sua intenzione profonda, infrange la regola della parola vietata: è una parola detta perché contestualmente fosse scritta, una parola dettata a comporre il testo di una scrittura pubblica: le lettere, composte dunque in gran parte oralmente, pur attestandosi formalmente in una zona di frontiera tra oralità e scrittura, nascono in realtà, *ab origine*, come testi di scrittura. L'ambiguità della loro natura, che si estende ad animare l'immagine della loro autrice, è suggerita da Caterina stessa che nella lettera già ricordata, indirizzata a Raimondo da Capua, suo confessore e direttore spirituale, scrive:

Questa lettera, e un'altra ch'io vi mandai, ho scritte di mia mano in su l'Isola della Rocca, con molti sospiri e abbondanza di lagrime; in tanto che l'occhio, vedendo, non vedeva; ma piena di ammirazione ero di me medesima, e della bontà di Dio, considerando la sua misericordia verso le creature che hanno in loro ragione, e la sua Provvidenzia; la quale abbondava verso di me, che per refrigerio, essendo privata della consolazione, la quale per mia ignoranza io non cognobbi, m'aveva dato e provveduto con darmi l'attitudine dello scrivere, acciocché discendendo dall'altezza, avessi un poco con chi sfogare 'l cuore, perché non scoppiasse. Non volendomi trarre

ancora di questa tenebrosa vita; per ammirabile modo me la fermò nella mente mia, siccome fa il maestro al fanciullo, che gli dà lo esempio. Onde, subito che fuste partito da me col glorioso evangelista Joanni e Tommaso di Aquino, così dormendo cominciai ad imparare. Perdonatemi del troppo scrivere, perocché le mani e la lingua s'accordano col cuore. Gesù dolce, Gesù amore.

(272; 1164-65)

La parte citata — che chiude una lunga e importante lettera in cui Caterina comunica al suo direttore spirituale il nucleo essenziale del *Dialogo*, il *Libro* che di lì a poco avrebbe composto — è, a mio avviso, un documento prezioso che conserva, tra le maglie strette della tradizione del testo, un frammento di esperienza connesso alla pratica della scrittura e a quella immaginazione di sé che non può non averla accompagnata. L'annuncio che in essa Caterina dà del dono de "l'attitudine dello scrivere" presenta una doppia valenza: informa che, come le donne della comunità che assolvevano per lei alla funzione segretariale, anche Caterina possiede l'uso della scrittura; avvalora, nello stesso tempo, quell'immagine di sé come donna semplice, di poca cultura ma prescelta da Dio, che la conferma interna all'ortodossia, aderente al modello socialmente riconosciuto di perfezione femminile.

L'apparente contraddittorietà dell'enunciato, risolta nel testo con il racconto di una metamorfosi avvenuta nel sonno che sottolinea la natura divina dell'evento, può essere sciolta e interpretata se noi contestualizziamo la lettera nel percorso biografico della sua autrice. Nella primavera del 1374 Caterina è convocata al Capitolo generale dell'Ordine dei frati predicatori, a Firenze: "Venne a Firenze nel mese di maggio anni MCCCLXXIV, quando fu il Capitolo de' frati Predicatori, per comandamento del Maestro dell'Ordine una vestita delle Pinzochere di Santo Domenico, ch'ha nome Caterina di Jacopo da Siena", annota, nello stesso 1374 l'Anonimo Fiorentino.<sup>6</sup> Nulla sappiamo circa i contenuti dell'inchiesta a cui Caterina fu in quell'occasione sottoposta, ma certamente ne uscì bene dal momento che, subito dopo, hanno inizio i viaggi e i suoi interventi nelle cose della politica. Nello stesso tempo, però, Caterina è sottratta alla tutela dei superiori senesi per essere affidata a Raimondo da Capua, delegato a questo compito di direzione spirituale dal Generale dell'Ordine domenicano. Due anni dopo, nel 1376, ad Avignone, dove svolge presso papa Gregorio XI la sua più famosa missione politica, Caterina è sottoposta ad una seconda inchiesta condotta da tre teologi incaricati dal papa stesso di verificare l'ortodossia del suo pensiero e del suo operato. Figura dunque di frontiera, per la gerarchia ecclesiastica, tra eresia e ortodossia — elemento questo che la

<sup>6</sup> Anonimo Fiorentino, *Questi sono e' miracoli della B. Caterina*, in Misciattelli P. (a c. di), *Appendice a Caterina da Siena, Le lettere VI 154*: il testo, scritto nel 1374, deriva da una copia del codice Stroziano XXXI della Biblioteca Laurenziana di Firenze.

riconnette ad una esperienza collettiva delle donne del tempo — Caterina esce per la seconda volta dal sospetto e dal controllo confermata nella verità del suo pensiero.

La lettera scritta a Raimondo da Capua dalla Rocca di Tentennano è della prima metà dell'ottobre 1377: Caterina, resa autorevole dal suo operato, e confermata dalla formalità delle verifiche a cui è stata sottoposta, può ora ridefinire in proprio la sua immagine pubblica e dirsi soggetto, per volontà divina, di scrittura. La trasformazione di immagine che, con questo, Caterina realizza in rapporto al modello di perfezione femminile codificato dalla tradizione agiografica, non è cosa da poco: interna ad una corrente di spiritualità femminile che, tra oralità e scrittura, va definendosi in tradizione, Caterina riconosce infatti tutte le valenze di potere insite nella scrittura, e se ne appropria. La forza di questo segnale — non a caso, io credo, lasciato sistematicamente cadere dai suoi biografi e dai suoi interpreti come dato in sé irrilevante — è confermata dall'intenzione profonda che muove Caterina nel dirsi soggetto di scrittura. La lettera a Raimondo precede infatti di poco, o è addirittura contestuale, all'avvio della composizione del *Dialogo*, realizzato in un arco di tempo compreso tra l'ottobre del 1377 e l'ottobre del 1378.<sup>7</sup> Il *Libro*, come lei stessa lo definisce, costruito in forma dialogica a rappresentare la relazione diretta di Caterina con la Divinità, è una *summa* del suo pensiero elaborata in un testo a carattere teorico-dottrinario: la stesura in prima persona della lettera al direttore spirituale, che ne anticipa lo schema, equivale dunque ad una firma, di quella lettera, e insieme del progetto ambizioso del *Libro*, un evento consentito e legittimato, nel suo racconto, da un disegno sovrumano, dalla indiscutibile volontà di Dio. Caterina progetta, dunque, all'altezza di questa lettera, un passaggio di genere, nell'elaborazione del suo pensiero, ed una ridefinizione alta dell'immagine di sé, in cui l'uso diretto della scrittura si propone, nella formulazione del racconto, come una affermazione perentoria, evento straordinario che di per sé si sottrae ora a qualsiasi vaglio di natura umana.

In questa definizione pubblica della natura complessa del suo pensiero e della propria figura intellettuale Caterina guarda forse ad Angela da Foligno, l'unica donna della tradizione italiana ad aver intrecciato sistematicamente il proprio percorso di perfezione con l'uso pubblico della parola: entrata, dopo la morte del marito e dei figli, nel Terz'ordine francescano, Angela tra il 1292 e il 1296 compone oralmente in volgare la sua autobiografia spirituale, trascritta in latino da frate Arnaldo con il titolo di *Memoriale*, prima parte del *Liber*, un testo che ebbe subito diffusione sia in volgare che nella versione latina, e che diede alla figura di Angela risonanza e autorevolezza.<sup>8</sup> Caterina avviando la composizione

<sup>7</sup> Per i rapporti tra questa lettera e il *Dialogo*, cfr. Dupré Theseider E., *Sulla composizione del Dialogo di S. Caterina da Siena*; Cavallini G. *Presentazione della sua edizione di Caterina da Siena, Il dialogo della Divina Provvidenza XXI-XXVI*.

<sup>8</sup> Angela da Foligno, *Il libro dell'esperienza*, a cura e con Introduzione di Pozzi.



del suo *Libro* — che, come le lettere, si è tramandato come dettato in estasi e quindi trascritto dai suoi discepoli — parte dunque dall'esperienza intellettuale di Angela, la fa propria, e si propone di avvalorarla e di superarla definendosi lei stessa *auctor* del proprio pensiero, delle proprie parole, della propria scrittura. Lo conferma, indirettamente, la lettera-testamento inviata da Roma a Raimondo, in cui, ormai morente, ripensando alla sua vita e alla sua scrittura, dice:

Anco vi prego che il libro e ogni scrittura la quale trovaste di me, voi e frate Bartolomeo e frate Tomaso e il Maestro, ve le rechiate per le mani; e fatene quello che vedete che sia più onore di Dio, con Missere Tommaso insieme: nel quale io trovava alcuna ricreazione.

(373;1194)

Se dai frammenti di un pensiero di sé che le lettere hanno tramandato dalla composizione di Caterina fino alla nostra lettura torniamo ora alla raccolta, la storia del testo, oltre a testimoniare quella lunga fase di riscrittura delle lettere e di composizione dei testi in un libro di cui già si è detto, ne racconta l'uso che la cultura ecclesiastica e quella laica ne hanno fatto, alimentando nel tempo immagini o modelli di donna, di cui l'ultima riformulazione la definisce come la prima scrittrice in lingua volgare della tradizione letteraria italiana. Il che, naturalmente, è vero, se l'ottica, unica, è quella della storiografia letteraria corrente; ma è parzialmente vero o meno significativo di quanto potrebbe apparire, se la tradizione e il discorso storiografico sono invece attraversati da un'ottica di lettura in grado di evocare le assenze e di interrogare il testo fino a svelarne l'origine profonda, di considerare cioè la pratica della scrittura intrecciata alla vitalità dell'immaginazione che l'ha originata e resa possibile. È a partire da questo che si pongono, io credo, tutte le successive questioni relative all'interpretazione del testo.

Nel caso delle *Lettere* cateriniane, la presenza parallela del *Libro* è un dato che consente una lettura più contestualizzata e meno codificata delle lettere stesse: l'investimento prioritario che Caterina ha indubbiamente fatto in quel testo nell'elaborazione dell'immagine preferenziale di sé, che ci ha consentito di riportare la sua figura intellettuale a quella tradizione femminile a lei sicuramente presente, ci offre, nello stesso tempo, alcune chiavi di lettura per i testi del suo epistolario. La pretesa di firmare un *Libro della Divina Dottrina*, in cui il racconto dell'esperienza del perfetto amore — ottenuto dalla resa in forma dialogica dei grandi temi del suo pensiero mistico — dà vita ad un testo a carattere teorico-dottrinario, indica infatti l'origine e la natura di tutti i suoi discorsi. Lì, in quel rapporto di amorosa fusione con il suo Dio, in quell'esperienza solitaria, incomunicabile e indiscutibile, Caterina fonda la verità della sua dottrina e l'autorevolezza delle parole che lei rivolge agli uomini e alle donne del suo tempo. All'interno delle lettere, nel corpo centrale, la parte viva del testo, il tema legato all'esperienza mistica avvalora, infatti, e legittima quella

parte pratica attraverso cui Caterina pretende di agire nella storia. È dunque l'esperienza del perfetto amore che le consente l'uso della parola pubblica, un'esperienza di annullamento di sé in Dio che rigenera la sua immagine in una figura sovrumana connotata al femminile in grado di affermare verità indiscutibili.

Nel protocollo iniziale, la *sottoscrizione* ("Io Catarina, serva e schiava de' servi di Gesù Cristo"), che segue l'*invocazione* e l'*indirizzo*, e che, attraverso la formula "con desiderio di", introduce la lettera, conferma, pur nella rigidità della formula consueta alla tradizione cancelleresca, la presenza di un soggetto la cui autorevolezza, evidenziata dalla frequenza dell'imperativo, si fonda sull'enunciazione sistematica dell'esito conoscitivo dell'esperienza mistica: è un io che si fa carico di dire l'ineffabile, e di predicarlo tra gli uomini e le donne del tempo. È un io che ha assunto il punto di vista del Dio-madre, esterno e insieme partecipe a quella realtà umana a cui rivolge le proprie esortazioni: lo dimostrano l'uso delle similitudini legate alle forme del materno che danno forma letteraria al Dio madre e misericordia, e la natura delle metafore in cui si calano le figure centrali del mondo interiore di Caterina (la madre della carità, la stella della virtù, il latte dell'orazione) il cui valore semantico è accentuato dalla congiunzione del concetto e del termine traslato. L'annullamento in Dio, che le ha portato il dono e il privilegio della parola mistica, consente a Caterina lo sdoppiamento dell'io che sottoscrive il testo, dal sé che partecipa della vicenda umana. L'incommensurabile distanza che separa la soggettività della sua esperienza mistica dall'oggettività della storia, le consente infatti di narrarsi come parte di quel contesto tra cui diffonde, con la parola, la sua verità: tra immagini di vita familiare o di realtà borghesi o cittadine, similitudini che veicolano i temi della meditazione e della predicazione, appaiono dunque in scena l'umano conflitto tra debolezza e forza, la tenerezza degli affetti, la materialità del corpo, la vicenda esteriore di quella stessa esperienza di perfetto amore che l'ha resa soggetto e testimone di verità. L'oggettività dello straordinario evento è, in quest'ultimo caso, sottolineata dallo slittamento nel testo dalla prima alla terza persona, talvolta accompagnato dall'introduzione, come figura altra da sé, di una "serva di Dio": "pregai una serva di Dio, che offerisse lagrime e sudori dinanzi da Dio" (272;1153). L'esempio citato, il più significativo dell'intero *corpus* delle lettere, introduce il racconto a Raimondo da Capua di quella particolare esperienza interiore in cui il dialogo con Dio darà forma al *Libro* della divina dottrina. Il passo prosegue, infatti, dicendo:

Onde subito per divina grazia le crebbe uno desiderio e una allegrezza sopra ogni modo. E aspettando che venisse la mattina per avere la Messa, che era il dì di Maria; e, venuta l'ora della Messa, si pose nel luogo suo con vero cognoscimento di sé, vergognandosi dinanzi da Dio della sua imperfezione. E levando sé sopra di sé con ansietato desiderio, e speculando con l'occhio dell'intelletto nella Verità eterna, dimandava ine quattro petizioni, tenendo

sé e il padre suo dinanzi alla sposa della Verità.

(272;1153)

L'oggettivazione di sé in figura di una terza persona, che consente a Caterina di distanziarsi dall'assoluto del suo immaginario, è dunque l'artificio retorico che le permette di narrare — in una intensa e drammatica messa in scena — l'indicibile, ciò che, in quanto esito di un rapporto individuale d'elezione, la separa dagli uomini e dalle donne del suo tempo. E raccontare lo straordinario evento le consente di ritornare alla storia con l'autorevolezza di una parola di verità. "Io muoio e non posso morire", scrive, dicendo la pienezza dell'abbandono; e, nominando dell'esperienza solitaria l'impossibilità dello sfogo, continua scrivendo: "se non che lo Spirito Santo m'ha provveduto dentro da me con la clemenza sua, e di fuore m'ha provveduto di passarmi con lo scrivere" (272;1164). Dentro di sé, si celebra dunque, in un processo autogenerativo, la nuova nascita; fuori di sé, nella storia, la scrittura, da Dio stesso formata "nella mente [sua], siccome fa il maestro al fanciullo, che gli dà lo esempio" (272;1164), le permette di ritornare dall'abbandono interiore alla vita esteriore, per raccontare l'esperienza del perfetto amore, e per proporre gli esiti conoscitivi. Della storia, la figura umana di Caterina è certamente parte: lo dimostrano nelle lettere, nonostante la caduta delle parti più legate al quotidiano, la freschezza dei quadri cittadini, la vivezza dei rapporti amicali o degli affetti familiari. È una realtà, quella umana, di cui Caterina partecipa pienamente, come sottolinea l'uso frequente della prima persona plurale, che accomuna il soggetto del discorso ai destinatari dello stesso; di cui riconosce gli assetti e le gerarchie di potere, di cui assume i ruoli sociali e quelli sessuali. Ciò che da essa la separa è l'intangibilità della sua esperienza interiore, la pienezza di quell'immaginario in cui Caterina rigenera l'immagine di sé nei tratti sovrumani di una figura esemplare, custode di una parola di verità attinta alla fonte del Dio madre e misericordia.

L'attitudine dello scrivere, dono a lei concesso dalla misericordia di Dio perché "discendendo dall'altezza" avesse "con chi sfogare 'l cuore, perché non scoppiasse" (272;1164), le consente dunque, accordando col cuore "le mani e la lingua" (272;1165), di dire di sé la propria nuova nascita, di raccontarla, allora e per sempre, attraverso i segni della scrittura. Accanto ai temi della mistica e alle parti superstiti di una parola più vicina alla vita quotidiana, questi frammenti di scrittura che, in margine alla parola vietata, riflettono sulle potenzialità della scrittura stessa, ci consentono, dunque, di incrinare la rigidità dell'immagine cateriniana e di accostare, attraverso le parole conservate, quell'immaginario di sé di cui le lettere, ancor oggi, conservano intatta la straordinaria carica autoaffermativa.



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## St. Catherine of Siena in Late Medieval Britain: Feminizing Literary Reception through Gender and Class\*

At the National Gallery of Scotland a large panel (66 1/2 x 67 inches) displays St. Catherine of Siena trampling on the devil as she hands to a cluster of kneeling female members of the second Order of Dominicans on her right an open book (the Rule) and to a cluster of kneeling female members mainly of the third Order of Dominicans on her left a scroll (the regulations; "St. Catherine of Siena as the Spiritual Mother of the Second and Third Orders of St. Dominic," figure one).<sup>1</sup> On one side of St. Catherine stand St. Dominic holding a lily, who created the order of the blackfriars, or preaching friars, and St. Peter the Martyr, with a hatchet buried in his head; on the other stand the archangel Raphael and St. Laurence, both deacon and martyr.

The event that this painting commemorates is the significance of her own clothing in the black Dominican mantle, which casts her, as the first virgin received into the Dominican Third Order (consisting of lay people both married

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<sup>1</sup> This tempera panel was purchased in 1911 by the National Gallery; it had been acquired by Charles Butler in Florence before 1885, after which he loaned it to the Royal Academy of London for an "Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters" and then to the New Gallery of London in 1893-94 for "An Exhibit of Early Italian Art." See the catalogue compiled by Hugh Brigstocke of *Early Italian and Spanish Paintings in the National Gallery of Scotland*, #1030; also Bliss 31-32.



and unmarried), into the role of "head and foundress of all the virgins that, by her example, were admitted into the same order."<sup>2</sup> This panel, by Cosimo Roselli (1439-1507), was commissioned for the Church of Domenico al Maglio and completed no earlier than 1485 (Roselli had been summoned to Rome to help embellish the side walls of the Sistine Chapel in 1481) and possibly as late as 1499, at the time his three nieces entered the newly-completed convent of St. Catherine of Florence, to which the Church was attached, to become nuns.<sup>3</sup> Although the earliest depictions of St. Catherine had been completed by Andrea Vanni for the Church of San Domenico (a fresco, ca. 1385) and by the Sienese Master of the Dominican Effigies, a late follower of the Lorenzetti, in Murano, an altarpiece now at the Museo Civico Vetrario (ca. 1400), as well as others,<sup>4</sup> most striking about this work is its pointed suggestion of female power, authority — over the written word — and of reception, for both Catherine's work and life.

A similar arrangement appears as a woodcut frontispiece and ending illustration (two of eight total woodcuts) for the 1519 Middle English translation of her major work published by Wynken de Worde from William Caxton's plates (figure two, opposite Prologue).<sup>5</sup> The illustrator, however, has depicted twelve mantled female figures standing apostle-like, rather than kneeling before the four male saints and angel, to the left and right of a Christlike, seated St. Catherine who tramples the devil. That the influence of Caterinus Senensis, patron saint of Italy along with St. Francis of Assisi, extended even to Great Britain, and

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<sup>2</sup> See the sixteenth-century biography by Lancelotto Politi (1483-1557), Archbishop of Conza, Part 1, chap. 14, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> See the brief article by Gronau 35. Apparently the convent was not opened until just before 1499.

<sup>4</sup> There exist depictions by Fra Angelico, Lorenzo de Pietro (Vecchietta), Giovanni de Paolo, Neroccio di Landi, Beccafumi, Girolamo di Benvenuto, Bernardino Fungai, Guidoccio Cozzarelli, Balducci, Vincenzo Tamagni, Benvenuto di Giovanni, the Master of Minato, Giralomo de Benvenuto, and Girolamo del Pacchia; see the chronology of paintings in Kaftal (1949).

<sup>5</sup> *The Orcherde of Syon* (1519), fol. a.1v; I do not know how the illustrator came to be familiar with the composition of the original Roselli painting — if he was in fact; it may well be that he was influenced by the rendition of other saints in woodcuts of the period. See Driver 229-44, for a discussion of Bridgettine texts related by their woodcuts, including *Orcherd of Syon*. The woodcuts do not appear in Hodgson and Liegey, eds. *The Orchard of Syon* (1966), from which all citations to the Middle English translation will refer unless otherwise noted. There were three earlier fifteenth-century manuscripts of the *Orcherd*, according to Hodgson in her article, "The Orchard of Syon and the English Mystical Tradition" 229: Harleian MS. 3432, St. John's College, Cambridge, MS. 75. and Pierpont Morgan Library MS. 162. That Catherine is still teaching other women, even today, and is important to study within the context of the cultural contribution of women, can be seen in two recent chapters on her work, one written in relation to other medieval women visionary writers, by Berrigan, and one in relation to other women philosophers, by Wolfskeel.

women religious on the island, is indeed the subject of this paper.

St. Catherine of Siena, born in 1347, about the same time as Geoffrey Chaucer, exerted great power during and after her brief lifetime (d. 1380). This influence during her lifetime was expressed through her effect on the Dominican order — the Roselli panel aptly illustrates her role as its first woman member and therefore its spiritual mother — and on Church reform, the latter at the time of the Great Schism in the Church and rebellion by the city-states of Italy, including Florence, whose conflict with the Pope she helped to mediate. After her death, her influence on and importance to the Dominican Order and on the Church continued, signalled in part by the story of her life and miracles, especially as it was conveyed through the Latin *Legenda* written by her biographer and confessor, Master Raymond of Capua, between 1383 and 1395, which was translated after her canonization in 1461 even into Middle English and published in 1493. In addition, the influence of her own writings spread, chiefly what she called her “Libro,” or *Dialogo*, dictated to her scribes in her own Tuscan dialect before November of 1378, when she was summoned to Rome,<sup>6</sup> and then translated into Latin and Middle English. The Latin version of her *Dialogo* considered to be closest to the vernacular exists in a University of Edinburgh manuscript which, as this essay will argue, attests to a strong fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Scottish and English ecclesiastical and literary

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<sup>6</sup> The matter of the writing and revision of the *Dialogo* and Catherine’s role in the same has been discussed and debated by scholars but not fully and finally resolved. Two years before her death, according to Raymond of Capua’s *Legenda major* 3.3, she dictated to her secretaries a book of dialogue between a soul who asks four questions and God, who answers with many truths. Earlier still, in October of 1377, she had written to Raymond a letter that seemed to describe the organizational frame of the book, involving four petitions to God — for church reform, for the whole world, for Raymond’s spiritual welfare, and for an uncertain unnamed sinner (that is, herself). For the parallels between letter 272 and the *Dialogue*, see Dupré-Thesider 161-202. Because there is no original manuscript of the *Dialogue*, modern editors have had to choose among the transcriptions by her disciples, Barduccio Canigiani, Stefano Maconi, and Neri di Landoccio de’Pagliaresi, among whom Barduccio Canigiani has been singled out as having written the manuscript bearing signs of fewest interpolations and change and therefore closest to the “original” (see Noffke, “Introduction” to her translation of *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena* 19). This manuscript, 292 of the Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome, would have been written before December 8, 1382 (the date of Barduccio’s death); most important, there are passages in which the first person accusative pronoun “me” has been crossed out in phrases “me, Dio e uomo” (chapters 110-11), when God the Father identifies the Eucharist as “me, God and man” (see Motzo 111-41). Whatever the reason for the crossings-out, they suggest the manuscript is the closest to the original (according to Motzo, the other manuscripts do not contain the pronoun at all). Also, interpolations found in other manuscripts are not found in this manuscript. See Noffke 19. Whether she wrote her book in her own hand at any time is not at issue; Tommaso Antonio Caffarini of Siena admits that he was told by Stefano Maconi that Maconi saw her writing herself “several pages of the book which she herself composed in her own dialect” (*Libellus de supplemento* 1.1.9).

interest in and reception of the writings of this Italian saint.

My emphasis will fall on how Catherine's writings and legend were disseminated within Britain from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. Among the questions I would like to raise, if not completely answer in this essay, are: why does this dissemination capture the attention of late medieval poets such as Sir David Lindsay and printers such as William Caxton and Wynken de Worde and of an aristocratic audience composed mainly of women readers secular and ecclesiastical in both England and Scotland? What differences in Middle English literary influence might be ascribed to St. Catherine's class — that of a commoner from a large Sieneze family headed by a wool dyer — so different from that of the readership for which the writings were intended, and to her gender, which marked her writings and the story of her life as culturally other than that of the mainstream? That is, how do the Middle English translations of her work differ, if at all, from the original writings? How has the translator (or the printer) interpreted her writings and what do those "interpretations" — omissions, additions, changes, or in the case of a printer, composition and illustration — tell us about her cultural and literary reception in early England?

Examination of her reception in late medieval Britain — dissemination of her life and work in manuscripts of *Horae* and kalendars, changes and omissions in the Middle English translations of the Latin and Italian works, and illustration and printing of those Middle English works — suggests that issues of class and gender difference evident in her work and her *Lyf* appealed to her English readers, both male and female, and therefore both reflected and contributed to the democratization of religious literary production and the feminization of the Church in the late Middle Ages outside Italy. The unifying image of the bridge which she uses in the *Dialogo* symbolizes Christ as mediator between human and divine, lowest and highest of social classes, languages of humble vernacular and learned Latin, female and male. Representing the sacraments of the Church, especially Holy Communion, Christ's Body is transformed into a bridge, its bricks and mortar, and comes to be identified with Catherine herself, who, having received the stigmata, also mediates spiritually and culturally, through her own book, and in the Middle English version of her life, between women and the patriarchal institution of the Church.

Her influence in Britain was magnified by other factors occurring at the time, mainly the advent of printing, the increase in female readership, and the spread of feminized spirituality through women secondary and tertiary members of the Franciscan and Dominican Orders. In England, St. Catherine's impact was no doubt bolstered by the use of her writings to foster and nourish the members of the convent belonging to the newly founded house of St. Bridget (Birgitta in Swedish) of Sweden (d. 23 July 1373), of the Rule of St. Savior (an adaptation of the Augustinian Rule). Bridget's convent was begun in 1414 in Twickenham, and completed in 1415, seven months after her canonization; its foundation stone was actually laid by Henry V, a supporter of St. Bridget throughout his life, on



22 February 1415.<sup>7</sup> Located opposite the Carthusian abbey at Sheen, Jesus of Bethlehem (founded in the same year by Henry V), the house of St. Bridget, Syon Abbey, was moved to Isleworth (across from Kew Gardens, in Richmond) in 1431, where it remained until the Dissolution in 1539.<sup>8</sup> Of the six monastic houses founded between 1360 and 1540 in England, that of St. Bridget and St. Saviour was the most important; Syon Abbey came to be a site of pilgrimage for which penitents earned what was known as the "Pardon of Syon."<sup>9</sup> According to the charter, there were to be sixty nuns, one of whom would be abbess, thirteen priests, four deacons, and eight lay brethern (Aungier 29). Certainly Syon Abbey was a hub of translation and copying activity throughout its life, both in relation to the writings of its founding saint, which furthered her cult in England, but also in relation to the writings of others, often intended for the Bridgettine sisters.<sup>10</sup> One example, written for the "lady abbesse, of the worshypfull Monastery of Syon," was *The Myroure of oure Ladye*, which presents a particularization of the divine services for Sion, a translation of the "Hours" in use, and the "Masses for the Virgin."<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the Middle English translation of St. Catherine's major work, whose publication by Wynken de Worde was paid for by Sir Richard Sutton, Steward of Syon from 1513 and founder of Brasenose College at Oxford, in 1519,<sup>12</sup> is addressed by scribe "Dane Iamys" (whose identity is not known) to

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<sup>7</sup> See especially Deanesly 91-130, which discusses and contains many of the documents relating to its founding; and Knowles 2:171-81, for information regarding its founding. King Henry V, who laid the foundation stone, supported the Abbey and St. Bridget throughout his life, mentioning his prayers to her in his will and owning one of her relics: see Wylie 219-20. To a sympathetic "King Henry" (whether the Fourth or the Fifth is unclear) Stefano Maconi had also sent Catherinian "material," but apparently not his transcription of her *Dialogue*, according to Thomas Caffarini; this information comes from William B. Hackett and is cited in Hodgson, "*The Orchard of Syon and the English Mystical Tradition*," 231n2.

<sup>8</sup> See Aston 141-42, which includes a diagram of all these locations.

<sup>9</sup> See Blunt xi. The "Pardon of Syon" was mentioned in John Audelay's 1426 poem "A Salutation to St. Bridget."

<sup>10</sup> See also the "Catalogue of Sion Library" compiled by Bishop Tanner, British Library Additional MS. 6261, fols. 153-56; and Bateson, Appendix 1; and the essay by de Hamel 48-158. According to de Hamel, there are records of more than 1400 books catalogued at Syon (48), with more books printed for Syon than for any other monastery in England (101). For the impact of St. Bridget in fifteenth-century England, see Johnston; and for the uses of her manuscripts, see Ellis, "'Flores ad fabricandam . . . coronam'" (163-86). Hutchison discusses the role of Syon Abbey in guiding the reading of its nuns and other women (215-27). For a survey of fifteenth-century book production, see Bennett.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Blunt ix. The manuscript on which the edition is based (MS. Aberdeen University W.P.R. 4.18) is dated 1460-1500 and according to Blunt originally belonged to one of the sisters, Elizabeth Mounton (vii).

<sup>12</sup> "Rycharde Suttun esquier," Steward of the Monastery of Sion, is described at the end of the de Worde edition by translator "Dane Jamys" as "fyndynge this ghostely tresure these dyologes and

the "Relygyous moder and deuoute Sustren called & chosen besyly to labour at the house of Syon in the blessed vyneyerde of our holy Sauvoure his parfyte rule whiche hymselfe endyted to kepe contynuelly unto oure lyves ende under the governaunce of oure blessed lady."<sup>13</sup> After this orchard is planted by Dane James, the labor must also be continued by the Mother and Sisters, he acknowledges in his Lenvoy: "Now reverende moder and deuoute sustre youre orcharde is planted & sette at my symple deuysel apparayled with the helpe and grace of our mercyfull lorde by the gracyous prayer of his blessed moder youre pryncypall and glorious abbes" (3r).

The image of the vineyard, which explains the title adopted by de Worde from the Explicit of Harleian MS. 3432, the *Orchard of Syon*, probably is borrowed as well from the writings of St. Bridget, even though it is further explained in the Prologue and Epilogue by the translator: this book is a "fruytful orchard" in which one should walk as if in an orchard, to be comforted; the fruits and herbs are intended for purging of the soul as the walk is intended for physical comfort. On another level, the orchard, says the translator, is the paradise into which God put Adam, and man himself, an orchard made of sweet fruit whose gardener is free will. The allegory is extended into the organization of the book, so different from that of the original: "Dane Iamys" also "apparells" the orchard into seven parts, five chapters in each, or what have been described as thirty-five alleys for walking.<sup>14</sup>

The vineyard, a Gospel image found both in Matthew 20: 1-16, the parable of the workers in the vineyard that was also used by the *Pearl*-Poet, and in John 15: 5-6, "I am the vine, you are the branches," becomes a metaphor for the Church in St. Birgitta's *Regula Salvatoris* as the vine becomes Christ's extension of himself into new spiritual directions, that is, her new order.<sup>15</sup> So

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reuelacyons of the newe seraphycall spouse of cryste Seynte Katheryne of Sene in a corner by it selfe wyllynge of his greate charyte it sholde come to lyghte that many relygyous and deuoute soules myght be releued and haue comforte thereby" (De Worde 8.3r).

<sup>13</sup> See *Orchard of Syon* (1519) 3. According to Bateson's *Catalogue of the Library of Syon Monastery* and the 1526 Cambridge Corpus Christi MS. 141, there was a copy of the *Reuelaciones catherine de senis wm aliis* (copied by William the Englishman?), donated by Curzon (probably David Curzon, Monk of Syon in 1537, declares Aungier 90, 428, 436; but in addition the fifth of the twenty extant copies of the de Worde *Lyf of Saynt Katherin of Senis* was owned by Robert Curzon and is now in Lord Zouche's collection at Parham according to de Ricci 114). There was also a copy of the *Vita sancte Katerine de Senis* (from which a translation might have come) donated by Lawis (probably John, deacon, who died in 1477). The identity of brother "Dane James," who may not have even translated the text but who may only have been a helper, cannot be known, according to Denise 291-34, but he may have been a Carthusian at Sheen (where "Dan" was commonly used), an English Dominican friar for whom "your brother" was a helper, or a Syon brother himself.

<sup>14</sup> See Hodgson, "The Orchard of Syon and the English Mystical Tradition" 236.

<sup>15</sup> "Ego sum sicut rex potentissimus, qui plantauit vineas suas et fecerunt optimum vinum multo

important was this image to the Bridgettines that there were orchards at both Vadstena and at Syon intended for the sisters' edification, the latter even now extant in vestigial form in the gardens at Sion House at Richmond and in the grapevine tended within a greenhouse at the abbey now situated in Devon; given this context, the Bishop-hermit Alfonso Jaén appropriately entitled two works taken from Bridget's *Revelations* as *Viridarium*, or "plantation of trees, pleasure garden."<sup>16</sup> The image of the vineyard of the Church and the tending of the vine by its clerical gardeners was also used by Dante in the *Paradiso* to describe the birth and life of St. Dominic in Spain.<sup>17</sup> Although St. Bridget was not a Dominican tertiary, St. Catherine of Siena was: the image fruitfully advances the feminizing of the Church accomplished by both of these women, and is particularly appropriate for a translation intended for the abbey at Syon.

In addition to these Bridgettine connections to feminine spirituality in England and to St. Catherine's works, St. Catherine herself received greater attention after her canonization in 1461, both in England and in Scotland. The Middle English translation of her influential Latin legend was published by Wynken de Worde, in 1493?, from Caxton's plates (his mark appears at the end of the book), entitled *The lyf of Saynt Katherin of senis; the revelacions of Saynt Elysabeth the Kynges doughter of hungarye*. Eight known copies exist of this edition; twelve others are owned privately but their whereabouts are unknown.<sup>18</sup> Most significantly, in 1517, four years after the disastrous battle at

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tempore. Tandem inimicus eius seminavit in eis semen pessimum, quod in tantum crevit et se dilatauit, quod palmites [vine branches] vinum eum: 'Domine, considerauiumus vineas tuas et inuenimus in eis valde paucos palmites portantes vinum et illud pessimum semen, quod ad nichilum valet nisi ad comburendum, vltra modum excreuit.' Quibus respondit dominus: 'Ego plantabo michi nouam vineam, vbi apportabuntur palmites et mittent radices. Et ego ipse apponam circa eam pinguedinem et implebitur vino optimo. Hanc autem per mentipsum custodiam. Quod si in eam aliquid nocium intrauerit, pinguescet ex hoc vinum et eo amplius dulcescet et illud nocium adnichilabitur et arescet et cicius decidet, ne noceat. Cum autem vinum vinee huius venerit ad collegium meum, tunc gaudebunt omnes et dabitur domino gloria et honor, qui plantauit vineam et pinguedinem apposuit. Gaudebant eciam ille, qui radices posuit, nec eius Deus obliuiscitur, qui palmites apportauit. Ex hac autem vinea multe vinee longo tempore arentes renouare incipient et facere fructum iuxta diem innouacionis sue," in Sancta Birgitta, *Opera minora I; Regvla Salvatoris* 102-23.

<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to Sister Julia Bolton Holloway for information about the orchards in the early houses; see also Ellis, *Syon Abbey: The Spirituality of the English Bridgettines House*, plates 47 and 48, 185-90.

<sup>17</sup> See Chance 177-98, rpt. in revised form in *The Mythographic Chaucer* as Chapter Five.

<sup>18</sup> See de Ricci 122, but see also for the description of this book 113-14 (no. 106), described as "96 ff.: a<sup>8b</sup>-p<sup>6</sup> q<sup>4</sup> 43 (and 44) lines. 214x150 mm.) Printed about 1493." There were only five books printed by Wynken de Worde from Caxton's types, of which this was one. Of the twenty copies, number 20 was sold by the Duke of Buccleuch (for whose family a street adjacent to Sciennes was named in Edinburgh) in 1889 (114).



Flodden, in which many Scottish lords lost their lives, a convent devoted to St. Catherine of Siena was founded by James the Fifth in Edinburgh at Sciennes (pronounced "Sheens" as a corruption of the Latin "Senis" for "Siena," or of the French "Siennes");<sup>19</sup> there is speculation that a nunnery had actually been given in the later fifteenth century, by Lady Saint Clair, Countess of Caithness and wife of Sinclair of Roslyn, and lands and a priest obtained at that earlier date.<sup>20</sup> It

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<sup>19</sup> See Chalmers 2:761. Although nothing is left of the old convent except a stone in the garden at the site (stones from the convent were supposedly used to build the Church of Greyfriars; see the Town Council Records 11:94 [July, 1602], there remains a suburb called Sciennes south of Old Town, bordered by Newington to the East, Grange Road to the South, and Marchmont Road to the West. Here street names preserve the history of the area, Sciennes Road, Sciennes Gardens, Sienna Gardens — acknowledgment of the origin of "Sciennes" — and most important, St. Catherine's Place, intersecting Sciennes Road. Details concerning the place of the original convent (and its seal) appear in Seton, "The Convent of Saint Catherine of Sienna near Edinburgh." There is also a St. Catherine's-Argyll Church of Scotland dedicated to St. Catherine of Siena at Chalmers Crescent and Grange Road, and a street named Seton Place, after one of the original sisters, Janet Hepburn, daughter of Patrick Hepburn, first Earl of Bothwell, wife of George, third Lord Seton (slain at Flodden in 1513), who had helped convince Pope Leo X to endow the convent (which he did in a Bull dated 5 June 1518), and probably also her granddaughter Katharine Seton, second daughter of the fourth Lord Seton (see *Cronicle of the Hous of Seytoun*, printed for the Maitland and Bannatyne Clubs, and Seton, *A History of the Family of Seton During Eight Centuries* 1:112-16. About both women the author of the *Caenobia monarchum* writes, "Saint Kathrine of the Sheenes, near to Edinburgh, was a Monastery of Gray Sisters. Katherine Seton, daughter to George, second Lord Seton, was a sister in this place, where she vow'd chastity att thirty-six, and died in the Shynes, a virgin of seventy-eight years, and was there buried. Jean Hepburn, daughter to Patrick, Earle of Bothwell, and spouse to George, third Lord Seton, who was killed at Flowden, after that her childring were come to adge, retir'd likewise to the Shynes, near to Edinburgh, which place she founded, and helped to build. There she died of ane good adge, for she liv'd forty-five years widow, and was transported in 1558, and buried in the quire to Seton," from Father Hay's *Scotia Sacra*, MS. in possession of the Faculty of Advocates 213, this excerpt published in Maidment 71.

<sup>20</sup> See Chalmers 2:761. The official documents on file at the Archives Room of the City of Edinburgh do not show any founding earlier than 1517. But Henry Sinclair, earl of Roslin, was appointed earl of Orkney in 1379, and after the annexation of the Northern Isles to Scotland through the dowry agreement for Margaret of Norway and Denmark, who married James III of Scotland in 1468, Orkney was no longer a Norwegian or Danish holding. Because the dowry pledge was not met in the three years following the marriage, both Shetland and Orkney became Scottish and the earldom of Orkney attached to the Scottish crown. It would have made good sense for Ross Sinclair, earl of Orkney, and the countess of Caithness (on the northern coast) to offer to create a convent in the capital city of Edinburgh, following both Catherine's canonization (1461) and the marriage (1468), as itself a pledge of good faith and reconciliation. It would also make sense that the Norwegian failure to pay, upon the death of Margaret, might have made backing for the convent similarly difficult. What is evident from the *Inventory of the Writings in the Charter-House of the City of Edinburgh* transcription and translation that the lands on which the convent must have stood were associated with St. Giles Grange and therefore St. Giles Kirk and the Dominicans from the mid-fifteenth century (if not earlier: see the history recounted in Smith 2-19,

is true that communities often were assembled some years before an official charter of founding was granted: note that Syon Abbey originated some sixteen years earlier, in 1415, at the Bridgettine house across from Sheen, before it was moved to Syon Abbey, and indeed it had a constitution from Bishop Arundel as early as 1408 (Blunt viii). Whatever its origin, the lands belonging to the convent at Sciennes were signed over to Henry Kincaid, the nephew of its last prioress, Christiana Bellenden, in 1567, after destruction of their place, "kirk, yards, and Houses thereof," probably by the English, in the year before.<sup>21</sup>

There abound manuscripts of breviaries in Scotland dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth century whose provenance is marked by the telltale coupling in their calendars of St. Catherine of Siena (often confused with the early St. Catherine of Alexandria, daughter or granddaughter of Constantine, whose date is November 25th, or with St. Katherine of Sweden, daughter of St. Birgitta), and St. Birgitta. The most famous of these, a handsomely illustrated English Book of Hours, of Sarum Use (University of Edinburgh MS. 39 [Borland 61-64]),

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which shows that the Grange lands originated in a gift to the monks of "Holme-Cultrane" as early as 1128 by King David I, 2). According to the *Inventory*, the Convent of Sciennes in fact occupied land owned originally by St. Giles Church. Although it was actually founded by Charter of King James Fifth "with Consent, Advice, and Authority of his dear Cousin and Tutor John Duke of Albany Protector and Governor of the Kingdom," on 17 April, 1517, due to a formal land grant from Sir John Crawford, Chaplain, who had also established a Chapel to St. John the Baptist there several years earlier, the lands in question had been linked from nearly a hundred years earlier with St. Giles Church (which had an altar to St. Catherine of Virgin and Martyr as early as 1359; see *Inventory*, vol. 3:136, box 4, bundle 3; also 119, for 1427, same bundle and box), and Blackfriars, the Dominican monastery. See Vol. 3:148, 150, and 153 for the charter of the nunnery to the lands of St. Giles Grange (for Box 4/4), the charter to the prioress confiscating the lands, and the brief of perambulation (historical charter 68). These documents are listed under a specific rubric in the *Inventory*, "The Writs of Saint Geill's alias Saint Geilly Grange, alias, the Siennes." There is also another set of writs, "The Writs Relateing to Saint Geill's Kirk, and the Siennes," for 1477, listed in the *Inventory Volume* 3:109, for the third bundle, box 4, for a "charter by the Provost of Saint Geils of a part of his yard to be aburying place for his Parishioners," a William Forbes, for the southside of St. Giles, listed as "Saint Geil's Alias St. Geilly Grange alias the Siennes." If this name was in existence by 1477 and if "Siennes" is a corruption of "Senis," then a convent must have been in place much earlier than 1517. The notes to the charters published in the Appendix to Maitland, Abbotsford Club, 1841, deletes the relationship between James and his tutor and the specific land boundaries for the Sciennes charter: see 63-64.

<sup>21</sup> *Inventory* 150 (#4); in 1566, the year prior, a Charter of the Hospital of St. Geils's Kirk indicates that this "Hospital of Provostry within the church" was in ruins, "perishing," "also the Policy and sacred Ornaments of the Church, gifted in old Times to God and the publick Good," because they "had been taken away and burnt by the Invasion of the English, that they could not be restored"; this burning and destruction must also have wasted the convent at Sciennes. See *Inventory* 3:169 (5th bundle, box four, document #1). Apparently the convent had been burned down earlier by the English, in 1544, and then rebuilt. In 1560 an angry mob pillaged St. Giles Church; it may also have destroyed the convent.



known as the "St. Katherine Book of Hours" and said to have been connected to the nunnery at Sciennes, opens with an unfinished hymn to Katherine the Virgin (fols. 1r-1v) added after the manuscript was completed. That this Katherine is not addressed as Saint Katherine suggests she is Catherine of Siena, who at the time of the writing of the manuscript had not yet been canonized, but may have been by the time the hymn was added (she is described as "sancta Katerina" within the text, however, on fol. 1v).

That Katherine was identified as "Katherine the Virgin" in the fifteenth century prior to her canonization is testified by an *Horae* (Use of Rome), Oxford University Keble College MS. 6, from Northern France in the fifteenth century, whose "Suffrages" does list among its nineteen saints or angels Katherine of Siena not as saint but as "virgo felix" and depicts her wearing a Dominican habit and holding a heart (fol. 49r); the iconography for St. Katherine of Alexandria usually includes a sword and wheel, as in Keble College MS. 15, fol. 14r.<sup>22</sup> Written and illuminated in East Anglia around 1430 in a formal Gothic script very like the second hand in the Guidini Latin translation of the *Dialogue*, the "Breviarum S. Katherine MS." as the modern labels reads, also contains a Katherine in the feminized Calendar of Saints' Days (fols. 2r-7v) but for December 7 — the early Katherine, whose feminine companions are St. Etheldrede, St. Margaret, St. Agatha, and St. Juliana; a life of St. Catherine; and a beautifully decorated copy of the Fifteen Oes of St. Birgitta of Sweden to the Virgin Mary (which Caxton also published, in 1491).<sup>23</sup> In the latter work, an illustration of the Pietà (fol. 123v) prefaces the clearly written praises of the Virgin in the fifteen Oes, each of which is transformed into a unique and exquisite flower whose orificiary artistry rather eerily and anachronistically appears to anticipate that of twentieth-century Georgia O'Keefe in her sexualized floral paintings, although the flower image is one Bridget uses of Christ's mother in the Middle English *Revelations*.<sup>24</sup>

Another fifteenth or sixteenth-century manuscript of an *Horae*, originally at Edinburgh, St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, but now at the National Library of Scotland, MS. 16499, contains both the Fifteen Oes of St. Birgitta, fols. 13-22v, the *Memoriae* of eight saints (fols. 27-37), of which one is Blessed Katherine the Virgin and Martyr, and twenty-two small pictures primarily of

<sup>22</sup> See Parkes. This identification contradicts Borland's statement that the hymn was "wrongly attributed to S. Katherine of Siena" 62.

<sup>23</sup> See Ricci 120, 126. For the association of the Fifteen Oes and the Bridgettines at Syon Abbey see Rogers 29-30.

<sup>24</sup> Mary is a flower with five leaves, "honeste, mercye, myldenes, fayreres, and soverayn delyte, . . . full of all swetnes" in *Revelations* 1.51, fol. 33a, cited from the Middle English in *The Revelations of Saint Birgitta, Edited from the Garrett Ms. Princeton University Library Deposit 1397* (57). Rogers 30 notes that the Fifteen Oes was not actually written by St. Bridget but was most likely written for the Bridgettines.



female and/or British saints like Barbara, Margaret, Katherine (in art. 4, the *Memoriae*, but which has been cut out, fol. 33v), and Thomas à Becket (29v).<sup>25</sup> In addition, a group of *Horae* written in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries (and now at University of Edinburgh Library), whether written in France, the Netherlands, or Germany, include kalendars, *memoriae*, or lives of virgins of which St. Katherine always finds a place.<sup>26</sup>

Some of these Katherine manuscripts have been linked with Syon Abbey, Sciennes, or, because of their attention either to St. Catherine of Siena or to St. Catherine of Rome, posited as having belonged to some other, unidentified nunnery of St. Katherine. For example, University of Edinburgh MS. 59, a fifteenth-century Latin *Psalter* of English origin whose kalendar (fols. 1r-6v) is both predominantly English (with saints Agnes, Edward, Cuthbert, Erkenwald, Etheldreda), and also Bridgettine;<sup>27</sup> the kalendar contains a *translatio* of "beate Birgitte" for 28 May and a *Natale* for 23 July, but it also includes a St. Katherine, for December 7, who is probably the early St. Katharine, who may have been confused with St. Catherine of Siena. Its use of textura links it with some of the other Catherine manuscripts (Borland 107); its kalendar is basically the same as that of the more famous "St. Katherine Book of Hours" (MS. 39). Other manuscripts have been associated with the convent at Sciennes, including of course University of Edinburgh MS. 150 (Borland), the unique Scottish transcription of the "Evangeliarum et constitutiones sororum ordinis predicatorum" for St. Catherine's convent.<sup>28</sup> Other MSS linked either with St. Catherine or the convent at Sciennes include University of Edinburgh MS. 30 (Borland 46), a fifteenth-century Dominican *Diurnale* with special services for three Katherines, including St. Katherine of Siena (fols. 228v-230v), which manuscript Borland believes was associated with a nunnery attached to St. Katherine (perhaps the earlier Catherine).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See Ker 581-83. According to Ker, this manuscript was written in the Netherlands specifically for "the English Market" but was in Scotland by the sixteenth century (583).

<sup>26</sup> For example, MS. 302, French, with Katherine in the kalendar; MS. 303, with Katherine in the *memoriae*, this written for the use of a woman; also MSS. 304-45.

<sup>27</sup> See Borland 106. De Hamel notes that "any extant English service-book with a Bridgettine text can reasonably be assumed to have been at Syon" 50, simply because the Bridgettines had both a unique liturgical rite and a single English house.

<sup>28</sup> According to Borland, MS. 150 was one of the first manuscripts given to the University, in 1593, written in a Gothic script (very like the second hand of Guidini's Latin "Liber Divine Doctrine S. Catherine Senensis" and also the "St. Katherine Book of Hours"). Fols. 21v-24v contain a hymn in Scots. For a modern publication of MS. 150, see Maidment, who has included it at the end of his monograph study of the origin of the convent along with other transcriptions of documents relating to its foundation and perambulation (the latter in 1567).

<sup>29</sup> There exists a Latin copy of St. Birgitta's *Revelations*, University of Edinburgh MS. 586; a life of the blessed Katherine the virgin and martyr (of Alexandria, possibly mistaken for St. Catherine of Siena, although she was no martyr; fol. 47rff) in the fifteenth century MS. 23 at the University

Why were the writings by and about St. Catherine so attractive to the religious women and houses described above? For one reason, within the text of the *Orcherd* God addresses Catherine in her visions as "Doghter," an explicitly gendered role intended to reform the Church, as we will see in her *Lyf*. That the work was read in such a consciously political manner in late fifteenth-century England is clear from the translator's gendered view of the irony of her success, that is, in spite of the fact that she was a weak woman — or *because* of it — she impressed and confounded powerful men:

Pope Pius the Secunde and Raymundus and dyvers other holy men besyde the cronyculers tellyth of her holynesse and wryte greate bookes of her lyfe & the actes that she hathe done greatly to the edyfyenge of crystes chyrche. O mervaylous goodnes of god that hath chosen so weyke a parson of woman kynde to confounde the greate men of myghte and all theyr pusaunie.

(de Worde edition, fols. 2r-v)

These are female "vines" — that is, so threatening to other male clerics that Jean Gerson, Christine de Pizan's later ally in the *Querelle de la Rose*, stated flatly in 1415 in "De probatione spirituum" 1.15 that "All words and works of women must be held suspect"; about the revelations of St. Bridget at the Council of Constance he raised questions relating to their veracity and origin. Others, such as the Franciscan Matthias Doring, pointed out 122 heretical statements in the *Revelations*.<sup>30</sup> Yet the writings of women such as St. Bridget, or St. Catherine,

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of Edinburgh, the whole of which is entitled the "Legenda sive revelatio nova itineris et passionis undecim milium et sanctorum virginum" martyrdom along with the "Vita et legenda B. Katherine Virginis," probably German or Dutch in origin. And MS. 27 (Borland) from the fourteenth century is a Sarum Breviary with kalendar listing two saints from the Lincoln diocese and other saints from Aberdeen and the north; the manuscript also includes a chronicle of Scottish history. Other Oxford Keble College MSS which list a St. Katherine in their *Horae* include: MS. 15, fol. 14, for "virgo sancta Katherina" with an illumination depicting her holding sword and wheel; MS. 19, from fifteenth century Germany, of a "Diurnale cum devotionibus," with a prayer to Katherine on fol. 189; MS. 23, an *Horae* (Use of Rome) from fifteenth-century France, with "Virgo Sancta Katherina" listed (fol. 147v); MS. 30, a *Breviarum Cassinense* (that is, from Montecassino), with a kalendar on folios 1-6v, and St. Katherine on fol. 494v; MS. 31, "Breviarium Fratrum Minorum" from fifteenth-century Padua or Venice, listing and illustrating Katherine for Nov. 25 on fol. 75 (the early Catherine, for she appears with a wheel). Sister Julia Bolton Holloway has noted that Florence Riccardiana 1345 includes St. Birgitta's *Revelations* bound with St. Catherine of Siena, probably copied by Baldinotti, a Bridgettine and daughter of Baldinotti of Pistoia; both Birgitta and Catherine shared a secretary appointed by the Pope, Bishop Hermit Alfonse of Pecha, from the Bishopric of Jaén (1303-1373), who edited Bridget's *Revelations* in 1370 and who was sent to Catherine in 1373 after Birgitta had died: see "Saint Birgitta of Sweden, Saint Catherine of Siena: Saints, Secretaries, Scribes, Supporters," *Birgittianae* (forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> See Gerson's tractate, "De probatione spirituum" (Aug. 28, 1415), in H. Von der Hardt, 3:28; he notes, "Quis sit, cui fiat revelacio? Quid ipsa contineat et loquatur? Quare fieri dicatur?"

or St. Elizabeth of Hungary (with whose *Life* that of Catherine is coupled in Wynken de Worde), did influence English writers, either from the Latin translations or from the Middle English translations, as exemplified by Thomas Hoccleve's paraphrase of *Revelations* 4.105 in his *Regement of Princes*.<sup>31</sup> Their originality, derived from an often uneducated and gendered or class-distinct context, offered a fresh source of images to cultures other than their own. Catherine's writings and her *Lyf* both provide such originality.

### I. The Bridge: Christ's Body and St. Catherine as a Figure for Class in the *Orcherd of Syon*

The *Orcherd* was most likely based on a Latin translation of the Italian *Dialogo* by one of Catherine's disciples and early witnesses, Cristofano di Galgano Guidini, from a fifteenth-century English manuscript now at University of Edinburgh, MS. 87 [Borland 142-43]), "*Liber Divine Doctrine S. Catherine Senensis*."<sup>32</sup> The original text was most likely brought to England either through the Dominicans, with whom Catherine was affiliated, or the Carthusians at Sheen or Mountgrace Priory outside York (Oxford University Bodleian Library Laud MS. 154, fol. 7v, lists the *Revelations* of St. Catherine along with those of St. Matildis and St. Elizabeth of Schönau as books owned by Witham

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among other questions. For the dispute about the *Revelations*, see Lundstrom 229ff. During the Council of Pisa the abuses of religion criticized by Parisian theologian Henry of Langenstein included the canonization of St. Bridget as well as the proliferation of new orders (see Lenfant 1:53); the latter was a charge specifically made of "*sancte Brigide et innumeris aliis*" and singled out as a sign of laxity at the Council of Constance in 1415, which resulted in the Swedes' vigorous petitions for confirmations of St. Bridget's canonization from both Pope John XXIII in 1415 and again from Pope Martin V in 1419 (see Finke 2:587).

<sup>31</sup> Hoccleve's paraphrase of *Revelations* 4.105 appears in his *Regement of Princes* 194.

<sup>32</sup> As to what Latin source existed in Britain from which a Middle English translation might have come, Hodgson has surmised that the Latin translation now at University of Edinburgh (MS. 87) must have been written by Cristofano di Galgano Guidini and not by Raymond of Capua, as the catalogue descriptions indicate (see Hodgson's edition vii; also her "*Orcherd of Syon and the English Mystical Tradition*" 231). Because Guidini first translated the *Dialogo* into Latin, in 1389, his translation is considered to be closer to the original Italian than some of the later translations. Hodgson's argument makes sense because Raymond died before completing the third translation (Stefano Maconi's was second), of which only the first five and the last two chapters exist, and therefore it is unlikely that MS. 87, of the entire *Dialogus*, was in fact written by Raymond. This unique manuscript has not been edited; it was of English provenance and was written by at least three scribes. Hodgson also posits either a Carthusian or a Dominican channel for the transmission of this MS. ("*Orcherd*" 231). William Flete, the English Austin Minor hermit close to Catherine, lived in Italy and may have transmitted some of these copies to his house in England: see Hackett 29-47.



Charterhouse by the mid-fifteenth century);<sup>33</sup> there may have been other means of transmittal, for example, through Adam Easton, from Rome.

The most important image in Catherine's original text, as in the Middle English translation, despite the translator's flowery frame, is according to Phyllis Hodgson that of the bridge that dominates chapters 26-87, drawn perhaps from Gregory the Great but as powerful in the Middle English as any other "apocalyptic" symbol in the works of the late Middle Ages, including *Piers the Plowman*.<sup>34</sup> The bridge is Christ, who connects the human and divine, and through whose body the soul can attain salvation. God tells Catherine,

But firste I wil bat bouloke þe brigge of my sone, and bat boubiholde þe greetnes of bat brigge which streccheþ fro þe heigt of heuene down to þe erþe. bat is to seye bat þe erþe of 3oure humanyte is ooned to þe greetnes of þe godheed. And þerfore I seye bat bat brigge lasteþ fro þe hiȝ heuene to belowe erþe.

(*Orcherd* 2.2, Hodgson 62)

Specifically, by Christ's body is meant the sacraments, especially Baptism, Confession, and Holy Communion.

English readers in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries perceived the Christlike bridge as an important unifying metaphor for the whole book and therefore also as a symbol for St. Catherine of Siena as author and mediator. This perception is apparent from the illustrator's use of the bridge (in the 1519 *de Worde* edition) in all but three of the eight woodcuts (each marking the opening of one of the seven parts or books, and the first and last the same), beginning with the first chapter of the second part (what in fact initiates the

<sup>33</sup> For an edition of the Witham Charterhouse library listing, see Thompson 32.

<sup>34</sup> Despite the work's seeming lack of organization, "The [symbol] which spans the whole *Orcherd* and gives its unity is the great apocalyptic symbol of the Bridge. The opening vision of *Piers Plowman* has comparable vastness and sublimity, but it is surpassed in dynamic force by the Bridge, which through its manifold interpretation is essentially a symbol of movement — the Way, the Truth, the Life. This is the Bridge of God's mercy," according to Hodgson, "*Orcherd of Syon and the English Mystical Tradition*" 240. The chapter divisions were not Catherine's — the "Book" was dictated in ecstasy, according to Guidini, who helped transcribe it (see "Memorie di Ser Cristofano di Galgano Guidini da Siena" 37), and issued as one long narrative, then edited by Catherine, and only divided into 167 chapters by later disciples. In 1579, when it came to be fashionable to write treatises, editors divided the work into four parts: Onorio Farrio noted the importance of the word "trattato" named in the chapter headings for the first four and inserted "Treatise" in large capitals up to the next heading with "trattato" (see Cavallini's Preface to her critical edition, *Il dialogo* xiv). Thus, the most important part, of the eight noted by Noffke — prologue (chapters 1-2), the way of perfection (3-12), dialogue (13-25), the bridge (26-87), tears (88-87), truth (98-109), the mystic body of Holy Church (110-34), Divine Providence (135-53), obedience (154-65), and conclusion (166-67) — is that on the bridge (26-87), "the central and most important part of the whole book, developed in several sections" (Noffke 15).

discussion of the bridge, or chapters 26-87 in the Italian).<sup>35</sup> Here (de Worde, c.vi verso) Christ appears as a bridge to God with Adam and Eve and demons to the side (figure three); at the first chapter of the third part souls are walking over the bridge while demons eat the damned (see figure four). The woodcut at the first chapter of the fourth part shows the bridge linked with the sacrament of Christ's body (see figure five); the woodcut marking the first chapter of the fifth part depicts the Eucharist in a temple and demons without, making love with mortals (see figure six). Finally, the woodcut at the opening of the sixth part reveals Adam digging and Eve spinning in a corner and salvation as the incarnation of the son through the Eucharist (see figure seven). The opening of the seventh book repeats the woodcut from the frontispiece (de Worde, fol. a.1r).

In all of these figures St. Catherine showing the stigmata also appears as an intermediary, a role signalled by her movement in the woodcuts from right to left. Just as the Christlike bridge so prominent in the early woodcuts is gradually subsumed by the temple and then disappears altogether, remaining only as the Host, Catherine is positioned in the first woodcuts on the right of the bridge, receiving revelations from God and holding her book in which they are inscribed. In the last woodcuts she has entered the temple on the left hand side and functions sacerdotally in celebration of the Host. As intermediary she is both conduit for God's word and also celebrant of Christ's body, a bridge between right and left, word and practice, outer and inner.

The bridge metaphor and concept are useful in explaining the translator's description of the genre of the work both at the beginning (de Worde 2r) and end as *dyalogys* and *reuelacyons* (a genre also used by St. Bridget and Julian of Norwich), that is, as dialogues or revelations that bridge the divine and human.<sup>36</sup> In de Worde's edition the book is called "*þe boke of diuine doctrine*," its authority coming from God himself to "*þe intellecte of þe glorious virgyn, Seint Katerine of Seene, of þe Ordre of Seint Dominike*," and "*endited in her moder tunge*" (de Worde, M f.qr, and Prologue, Hodgson 18). The book, Catherine's book, like Christ's body, becomes the equivalent of the Eucharist, a bridge *between* earth and heaven, and Christ's body becomes a means for the lowly to achieve the heights — for the commoner to become king. Christ is the "lowly earth" of humanity: "*whanne he had reisid hymself up, as whanne he was turmentid in þe cros, ȝit þe diuyn nature voidide hym not fro þe lownes of ȝoure humanyte*" (2.2, Hodgson 69; *Dialogo*, chap. 26). Indeed, the humbly born

<sup>35</sup> See Hodnett for a description of these woodcuts, 253-55, a reproduction of the first (fig. 66), and a discussion of their provenance, 28-29, and their influence, at least on the minor printer Henry Pepwell, 432 (#2275).

<sup>36</sup> In fact, both the original work and the translation appear to be structured as if a dialogue, through the reiterated pattern of petition-answer-thanks-giving, according to Cavallini, cited in Noffke xiii. Noffke identifies the structural principle as one of layering of arguments so that "even seemingly incompatible metaphors become inexplicably joined" (15).

Catherine herself becomes a type of Christ — a means of “translating” Christ into common parlance.

Specifically, Christ, and Christ’s body, become a metaphor for the empowerment of the commons as depicted in trades imagery both in the original and even more emphatically in the Middle English. The fact and figure of laboring — toil for the Christian worker — in the Middle English selection of words becomes more complex, to reflect the more multicultural background of the English whose words so often were loaned from French and the class differences those words reflect. In the following passage I will indicate the Italian equivalents:

3e ben my *lond tilieris and laboreris* [*lavoratori*, p. 29], which I haue hyrid, for  
 3e schulen *laboure* in 3e *vynezerd* of holy chirche. . . . 3e laboren now in 3e *body*  
*of cristen religyoun* [*corpo universale*], hyrid of me by a synguler grace with 3e  
 li3t of 3e holy baptym 3eue to 3ou. . . . Ech creature which hab resoun in hymself  
 hab a *vynezerd* of hymself, 3at is to seye, a *vynezerd* of his soule, whos wil wib  
 a fre chois schal be his *tyler* while he lyueb.

(*Orcherd* 2.3, Hodgson 63-64; chap. 23 of *Dialogo*, Noffke 60)

The translation of the single word *lavoratori*, “workers,” as the expanded doublet of *lond tilieris* (from the Old English) and *laboreris* (from the Old French) very subtly engages the Middle English concept of spiritual toil to straddle two different cultures, if not social classes. There will be no distinctions between social classes in the universal body of Christ.

These tillers have been given a *swerd scharp on bo3e sydis* (*cotello* in the Italian; that is, love of virtues and hatred of sins) to “reende up 3e 3ornes of deedly synnes” and to “plaunte 3e hi3enes of vertues” (2.3, Hodgson 64, Cavallini 30). The tillers, who seem to be the individual souls, then merge with the body of Christ to become the Church as manifested in the bread and wine of the Eucharist — the harvest of their toil: “For o3irwyse 3e schulen not resceyue 3e fruyt of 3e blood of 3e tilyers [*lavoratori*], which I haue sett and ordeyned in holy chirche, of 3e whiche tilyeris I haue seid to 3ee tofore 3at 3ei voidid away deedly synnes fro 3e *vynezerd* of 3oure soulis” (2.3, Hodgson 64; Cavallini 30). Only when they have uprooted (*tollevano*) sin from the *vynezerd* of their souls will they be allowed the “holy blood in 3e sacramentis ordeyned in holy chirche.” For, of course, it is God himself who is the *tyler* (*il lavoratore*) who has planted the vine of his son “in 3e ground of 3oure humanyte, 3at 3e whiche ben 3e braunchis ioyned wibe 3e vyne mowe brynge for3 fruyt” (2.3, Hodgson 64-65, Cavallini 61). God thus advises the workers to “do 3e as my seruauantis” (*i servi miei*) and be “ioyned togyderis in 3is soobfast and verry vyne” of the Church (Hodgson 65, Cavallini 61).

Sensitive to those below, other, behind, beneath, Catherine deliberately dis-  
 gentrifies Christ when she imagines a response to someone saying, “We se wel  
 3at 3ere is maad a brigge of 3is body of Crist for 3e oonheed of dyuyn nature with



oure nature of manheed. This we se wel is soob. But þis brigge whanne he styede up into heuene, he wente fro oure presence" (2.3, Hodgson 74-75, *Dialogo*, chap. 29, Noffke 69). To be human is to be lowly, a laborer, Christ himself, and therefore Christ is a living bridge, a way of teaching (Hodgson 74, Noffke 70), held together by the Trinity — God the Father's power, the son's wisdom, and the Holy Spirit's mercy. "Also he is þe wey of soobfastnes and liif actuely or by doctryne, which wey is þe brigge ledyng and bryngyng þou to þe heizþe of heuen" (Hodgson 75; Noffke 70). God declares, again empowering the lowest class by means of this metaphor, that "This liif and domynacioun was take to þou of þe doctryn and þat glorious brigge of my dere sone. Whanne ȝe weren seruantis of þe feend [*slaves of the devil*; the Middle English is actually closer to the Latin, *servos demonis*], my sone took þou out of þat seruage [*servitude*]. Þat seruage schulde be take fro þou, I ordeynede my sone a seruant; and putte to hym obedience, þat þe inobedience of Adam schulde be putt out; and þat pryde schulde be confoundid, he mekide hymself into þe moost cruel deeth of þe cros" (3.4, Hodgson 84, *Dialogo*, chap. 35, Noffke 76; Guidini, fol. 40v). That we work for our salvation but it is the quality of the work and not its quantity that matters is used in a similar allegorical context, in relation to the labor in the Vineyard, from Matthew, most profoundly in the fourteenth-century *Pearl*.

So the humbleness of Christ's common origin, like Catherine's, is enhanced through trades images — baking, the hammering of the smith, the construction of a bridge, the making of cloth (her father was a dyer, or a wool-dyer, and she was twenty-fourth of twenty-five children). The images continue to shift, but not in a haphazard way — from the bridge between human and divine, lowest of classes and perfection, Catherine turns to baking bread, which in its rising suggests change, metamorphosis, and Christlike movement. Her baking images suggest the baker's making of the daily bread and by analogy the Host, the Eucharist: "wiþ þe humanyte he was knytt verily and couplid"; "his divinity is kneaded into the clay of your humanity like one bread" (2.2, Hodgson 69, *Dialogo*, chap. 26, Noffke 65). Catherine also makes of the cross an anvil, "a goostly anveeld, whereon þe sone of mankynde schulde be forgid, so þat man schulde be waische and clensid fro euerlastyng deeth, and þat he schulde be cloþid wiþ þe durable liif by a synguler grace" ("where this child of humankind could be hammered into an instrument to release humankind from death and restore it to the life of grace" (Hodgson 69, Noffke 65); again, Christ's body was made an anvil (in *Dialogo*, chap. 35, Noffke 77, but not in *Orcherd*), a metaphor for the class from which Catherine comes. In the Latin of Guidini, "forged (hammered)" is "*fabricaretur*," *fabrica*, an art, trade, profession of *fabri*, also a workshop or smithy; *fabricatio* denotes a making, framing, construction with skill; the fabricator is an artificer, with all of these images suggesting skilled labor, the workman, and the building of a literal bridge.

So the construction of walls for the bridge is a practical, earthy necessity for Catherine: because of these walls travelers will not be hindered by rain (2.2,

Hodgson 70, *Dialogo*, chap. 27, Noffke 65). Catherine speaks also of the humble but necessary mortar that will bind the stones of the wall. Christ, both the builder and the bridge, is also the mortar holding the stones in place: "he made up þe wal of stoones, and medlid [mortared] it with chalk, and foorgide and foormede it vp wiþ his precious blood; þat is to seye, the blood is medlid with þe chalk and strenkþe of þe godheed and with þe greet fier of charyte" (2.2, Hodgson 71, *Dialogo*, chap. 27, Noffke 66; in Guidini, the Latin translator twice uses words related to fabrication, *lapides fabricati* and *fabricando suo sanguine*, fol. 30r). Christ is also the foundation, as the roof of the bridge is mercy, and Holy Church provides the bread of life and blood.

In addition to the spiritual structural images of bread, bridge, anvil, the body is yet another structure, on which to place clothes (clothing must have been uppermost in Catherine's mind, given her awareness of her father's trade). The image she uses in one of many passages, however, is more feminized than it is class-constructed:

And whanne þe blessid soulis resceyuen þe fruyt of my sones blood, which sone is clepid þe trewe holy lomb, also þe blessid soulis seen þanne alle þe peynes whiche þei suffreden in þe world ordeyned for þe ornamentis of her bodies [*ornamentis in corporibus*], as a raye of gold is put up a cloob [*pitti aurarium*]. & þat is not þoru þe vertu of þe bodi, but oonli þoru þe plenteuouse blis of þe soule, which representeþ to his body þe fruyt of hise traueilis, bycause þat þe body was asocied to þe soule & to þe excercises of vertues. Also þe body schal be knowe outward. And riȝt as a myrroure representeþ & schewiþ þe face of a man, riȝt so þe fruyt of hise laburs schal be presentid and schewid in hys body.

(2.5, Hodgson 97, *Dialogo*, chap. 42, Noffke 86)

The soul imprints on the body, as if the body were a bridge between the heavenly and the earthly; it can be said to labor, in a resurrection of the class metaphor — the despised body becomes a text for artificing, adorning, like "pitti" (*pittacium*, in Latin, a label, a patch, something placed on a bottle or cloth or clothing) — which in this case, *pitti aurarium*, probably refers to gold-embossed cloth.

In this sense Christ bridges what Dante posed as the symbolic tension between Dominican and Franciscan, for he is both truth and love. Catherine's metaphor of the fear of the good servant is distinguished from the "boondly dreede or a seruyle dreede" of those servants of the world afraid of losing what they own (3.2, Hodgson 116-18, *Dialogo*, chaps. 48-49, Noffke 98-101). In the original, Catherine uses a feminized class metaphor of sweeping the house for which is substituted in the Middle English a corporal and purgative image of the body as "house": "It is not enough for eternal life to sweep the house clean of deadly sin," but "þat dreede dooþ noȝing ellis but purgeþ a soule fro deedly synnes" (*Dialogo*, chap. 49, Noffke 100; 3.2, Hodgson 116). The good servant must fill the house with virtue grounded in love, not fear, and put both feet on

the first stair. The two feet that convey the servant into "love of Truth," the bridge, remain affection and desire. Specifically, "Sensualyte is a seruaunt, þe which is ordeyned to serue þe soule, þat ȝe mown haue experyence of vertu by þe instrument of þe body" (3.3, Hodgson 122, *Dialogo*, chap. 51, Noffke 105).

The foregrounding of class and especially the commons in Catherine's text provides a rich source of figuration for theological concepts difficult to convey plainly. Catherine's desire for a unified and harmonious society whose classes serve each other without demanding hegemony is both utopian vision and apt metaphor for the unity of the Church. So God says, close to the end of the *Orcherd*,

"O ðis þu seest by ensaumple þat a werkman or a crafti man gooþ for to lerne sum þing of þe tilier, & þe tilier of þe crafti man, so þat oon nedith to ben enfoormyd of anoþir. For oon cannot do þat anoþir can do. In þe same maner a clerk & a religyous man neden seculeris, & seculeris religious. For þat oon without þat oþir can noþing do; & þus of alle oþre. Myȝte I not ȝeue to euerych al þat is needful to him?"

(6.4, Hodgson 362-63, *Dialogo*, chap. 148, Noffke 311)

The attraction of late fourteenth-century poets to labor as a metaphor has not been linked specifically to St. Catherine of Siena, even though the metaphor dominates the earlier *Pearl*, in the image of the laborers in the vineyard, and the contemporaneous *Piers Plowman*, in the allegorical figure of Piers the Plowman as Christ, and the idealized figures of plowman and parish priest in Chaucer's *General Prologue*. As we have seen from the displacement of some of the class images related to the commons, the gender of the Middle English audience took precedence over labor images in this late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century text. Yet those images and concepts of gender found in Catherine's *Lyf*, current in the late fourteenth century in Latin and Italian, remain in the late fifteenth-century Middle English translation.

## II. The Role of Gender in *The lyf of saint Katharin of Senis the blessed uirgin*

The life of St. Catherine may have had greater currency and more literary influence in England than the *Orcherd of Syon* if only because it was published earlier, in 1493?; certainly her canonization in 1461 would have resulted in an increase in convents dedicated to her throughout Europe and renewed interest in writings by and about her. But earlier still her power as what Noffke terms a "mystical activist" must have affected others, including writers like Boccaccio, Petrarch, and even Chaucer. One story in Boccaccio's *Decameron* is said to have been influenced by her life, that of poor but virtuous Griselda (Barthouil 249-76); Petrarch translated this vernacular story into Latin, and Chaucer used the



anonymous French translations of Petrarch in constructing her story in the Middle English of the *Clerk's Tale*. Chaucer may have learned of her importance as mediator between the Florentines and the Pope (or of the existence of these Italian stories of Griselda based on her life) from his visits to Avignon and Florence in the 1370's; during the later years of this decade William Flete the English Austin Minor (a member of Catherine's *familia* originally from Fleet, in Lincolnshire, not far from Norfolk and Cambridge) was instrumental in making the case to the English to support Urban VI during the Great Schism: "he is true Pope, as has been made known to God's servants in revelations, inspirations and prayers," particularly those of Catherine. In one letter copied and circulated throughout England (between 1378 and 1380) William talks about all classes trying to kiss Catherine's hand; he also asks, "Are men to follow women, or be guided by their counsels?", and in praise of valiant women, in a passage on the Book of Proverbs, describes the battle-field as God's Church and "the vineyard which she has planted in her blood is the same Church, so afflicted to-day with the abuses of pride and pomp, ambition and simony" (Gwynne 177, 178). In 1382 William delivered an important sermon in Siena on the doctrines of St. Catherine, one of many he presented that year in Italy.<sup>37</sup>

Catherine, poor like Chaucer's Griselda, linked to a father named Giacomo di Benincasa (Jacob or James; Janicula is the name of Griselda's father in Chaucer), achieves her power much as does Griselda — through her speech and her words.<sup>38</sup> Just as Griselda remains entirely obedient to her tyrannical master, lord, and husband even though her speeches become more and more powerful, stronger, so also did Catherine obey the Pope and the Church, acting as a bridge between the commoners and the aristocracy. In addition, the fame of the Dominican tertiary who traveled so widely (for which the Sienese women in particular criticized her) and wielded so much influence with the Pope must have circulated in Italy and elsewhere even before the written testimonials. Her own *Legenda major*, by Raymond of Capua, was begun in 1384 and completed in

<sup>37</sup> See Gwynn 193, 240, for William's support of the Pope in 1378, in letters circulated from convent to convent and used as a base in the sixteen *demonstrationes* of the *Rationes Anglorum* (the English decided to support Urban VI at the Parliament of Gloucester in October 1378 but the document was not finished until summer of 1380; see 246-47). William's letters (Gwynne 177, 178), one addressed to or copied by Adam Stocton, an English friar, can be found in Trinity College-Dublin MS. A. 5. 3, fols. 179-86 and Royal MS. 7. E. X, fols. 85-87. For William's sermon about God's gift of Catherine to the Papacy, and in particular to Urban VI, in the battle against simony and other vices during the Babylonian Captivity (Siena, Biblioteca Comunale MS. T. ii. 7, fols. 17-29), see Fawtier, *Catheriniana* 46 and 64, also in *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 5.

<sup>38</sup> See Scott, "'Io Catarina'" 87-121; and also her dissertation, "Not Only with Words, but with Deeds: The Role of Speech in Catherine of Siena's Understanding of her Mission." See also Deborah Ausman's unpublished paper, "Reading Griselda Reading," delivered at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, on May 7, 1994.

1395, then expanded by Tommaso Antonio Caffarini of Siena in his *Libellus de supplemento*, who used the notes of her first confessor, Tommaso della Fonte, and eventually compressed, in the *Legenda minor*. But there were also memorials, one from Cristofano di Galgano Guidini in 1390.<sup>39</sup>

A somewhat shortened form of the original Latin, the Middle English *Lyf* is nevertheless closely based on Raymond of Capua's original Latin.<sup>40</sup> Possibly the Middle English translation was completed by Thomas Gascoigne, Chancellor of Oxford, who wrote the Latin *Life of St. Birgitta* and translated it into English for the sisters and monks at Syon.<sup>41</sup> Like Raymond the translator divides the life into three parts and includes abstracts of each chapter at the beginning.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Guidini's memorial appears in two publications, the Milanese ed. of "Memorie" 25-48, and in Taurisano 105-26; 2nd ed. (1927) 111-34. About Guidini's there is a note in Iacometti 333 (no. 40), which describes a "Copia di un memoriale di Cristofano di Gano Guidini notaio di Siena, scritto circa il 1390 (Segn. C. VI, 8)." See also item 44 listed for "Diario di Ser Cristofano di Gano Guidini, discepolo di S. Caterina e notaio dello Spedale, nel quale sono narrati gli avvenimenti più salienti della vita della Santa," in "Mostra Cateriniana di documenti manoscritti ed edizioni (secoli XIII-XVIII) nel Palazzo del Comune di Siena Catalogo," in *Atti* 275, described only as fourteenth century.

<sup>40</sup> Clearly this Middle English *Lyf* is attributed to Raymond's Latin original, not to that of Cristofano di Galgano Guidini: "This legende compyleda worthypfull clerke fryer Reymond of the ordre of Saynt domynik doctor of deunynte and confessour of this holy virgyn," fol. 1r. The translator acknowledges it is a partial translation of an original described as an "epistle": "Katheryne of Sene of Je whiche Epystle in sentence here foloweth parte translated in to englysche." A nineteenth-century transcription of the Caxton *Lyf* exists, in Horstmann 33-112, 265-314, 353-400. There were many Italian manuscripts of Raymond of Capua's *Legenda* from which a translator might have drawn, for example, Oxford Bodleian MS. Canonici Miscellaneous 205, after 1406, from Venice, containing a sermon, narrative of spiritual doctrine accepted by Catherine, epistle on her virtues, and a Prologue to her life, all by William [Flete] of England, fols. 1-6v; Raymond of Capua's *Legenda*, fols. 7r-75v; a "Tractatus de ordine et statu Fratrum et Sororum de poenitentia Beati Dominici," by Thomas and Bartholomew of Senis (as their names are neatly listed), fols. 76r-118v; a "Legenda B. Margaritae, nonialis S. Dominici, in Civitate Castelli sepultae (eadam fortasse auctore)," fol. 119r-121v; the Latin translation of Catherine's "Liber de Providentia Dei, ex italico," by Raymond of Capua, fols. 122r-127v (consisting only of five chapters of the first book), dated 1398; the *Legenda* of Saint Maria of Ognies by Vincentius de Vitriaco, fols. 128r-138v; and the *Vita* of the Blessed Maria Storioni of Venice, fol. 139v to the end.

<sup>41</sup> For Thomas of Gascoigne's role in translating the *Life of St. Birgitta* see Cumming, ed. *The Revelations* xxx. Apparently Thomas also ordered a copy of his papers on vellum at the expense of Syon Abbey and deposited it there, according to *Loci et Libro Veritatum* v. Gascoigne portrays St. Birgitta as having "octo proles," eight offspring, of whom three are St. Katherine the virgin from Mt. Sinai, St. Katerina de Senis, and St. Katerina of Vasten, in Sweden, Birgitta's daughter (53). I am indebted to Sister Julia Bolton Holloway for this reference.

<sup>42</sup> See *Legenda major*, in the *Acta sanctorum: Aprilis tomus tertius*, cols. 862b-975b for Raymond's *Legenda major*, cols. 861-86 for all the documents. There are also *Analecta* by Fr. Tommaso and Stephen Maconi, along with "De reliquiis," and a Bull of Canonization. See the translation of the

Addressed to "Daughter, *filia*," she who should learn by this example, the legend begins with Catherine's birth and holy works from childhood (twelve chapters, fols. 2va-29vb), continues with her "conversacion from time of her despoufacion to our lord until she died" (thirteen chapters, fols. 29vb-73vb), and ends with her death itself (seven chapters, fols. 73vb-91rb), ending on fol. 91r. Clearly both the Latin and Middle English versions give greatest weight to the middle book, on her "conversations." So the rubric for the beginning of chapter two, part two, stresses God's emphasis on her conversation with men as a tool he wished her to use: "Here begynneth the second parte in the which is shewed the *conversacion* of this holy mayde & vyrgyn wyth men. And how the yeftes the whiche she had receyved of our Lorde pryvely enclosed wythin her self. Were openly shewed to the worlde and firste how our lord bad her that: that she sholde be *conversaunt* amonge men" (fol. 1v, my emphasis).

Although differences between the Middle English and the Latin original are few, mostly a matter of compression and omission (the translator replaces the first person pronoun of Raymond with the third person, for example), some of the most crucial omissions involve sexualized images of women more suitable to a male audience, and therefore suggest the translator's sensitivity to his female audience. At the opening of Book Two, in the Latin Raymond uses the speech of the Sponsus from the *Canticle of Canticles* to describe God's invitation to Catherine, which is omitted in the Middle English, along with the Sponsa's (literally erotic) reply:

"Aperi mihi, soror mea amica mea, immaculata mea; caput meum plenum rore, et cincinni mei guttis noctium.' Cui sponsa respondet, 'Expoliavi me tunica mea, quomodo induar illa?'"

"Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is full of dew, and my locks of the drops of the night.' And she replies, 'I have put off my garment, how shall I put it on?'"

(2.1, col. 891b, Lamb 105).

The sexualizing of Catherine, even figuratively, is omitted because it detracts from her spiritual purpose as a role model to these English monastics.

An even clearer example of audience-response sensitivity occurs in the third, most political, book. After Urban VI was elected pope, on April 9, 1378, he asked Catherine to come to Rome because he had known her earlier, at Avignon, when he was Archbishop of Acerenza, and thus held a high opinion of her (3.1, Lamb 304). When she refused, again, listing gender as a reason ("many of this cyte of Sene and also of our owne Susters by cause of min goyng aboute hider



and thyder ben sklandred therby and seyn that it is not semely to a Relygous mayde for to go about," Caxton/de Worde, fol. 75rb, Lamb 304), he put his request in writing and she went. In Rome she speaks to cardinals about the Great Schism that resulted when Clement VII was set up in 1378 in Avignon (only on July 26, 1424, at the Council of Constance when Martin V was elected pope was peace restored), after which, Pope Urban again situates her speech within a gendered context: "This woman hath shamed us all. She sholde rather be aferd than we by cause she is a woman yet in that we be a ferde she is not aferd but confortd us wuyth her good counseyls" (Caxton/de Worde, fol. 74va, 3.1). Omitted from the Middle English is the Latin version's misogynistic and essentializing claim about women, the modern English translation of which reads, "A mere woman puts us to shame. I call her a mere woman, not out of disrespect, but with reference to her sex, which in itself is weak, and also for own own instruction" ["mulierculam autem voco, non in contemptum ejus, sed in expressionem sexus femineis naturaliter fragilis, et ad nostram instructionem" 946a; Lamb 305 trans.]. The Middle English translator, sensitive to the female audience for which he writes rather than the audience of clerics for which the *vita* is intended, omits an inflammatory statement as unnecessary to the point being made by the pope. Presumably these ecclesiastical women do not need to have the fragility of their sex reiterated in a context in which their moral enhancement is being invited and bolstered.

Throughout the *Lyf*, Catherine is specifically instructed by God to forget her gender (her *kynde*) in attempting *conversacyon* with both women and men, and to continue despite the slanders of others about the inappropriateness of her actions:

"Ferthermore thyn herte shall be soo gretely kyndelyd tohelthe of soules that thou shalt forgete in maner thy owne *kynde* & chaunge al thy fyrst conversacyon. For thou shalt not eshewe & shun the company of men and wommen as thou were wonte to do but rather for theyr soule helthe thou shalt put the to all maner of laboure to thy power and myght. Of thys maner of lyving many one shold be sclaudred and fo of many thou shalt be ageyn sayd that the thoughtes of theyr hertys may be knowen by theyr wordes. . . ."

(2.5, Caxton/de Worde, fol. 41ra; my italics)

The modern English translation clearly mentions "sex":

"You will forget your sex and change your present way of life; you will not avoid the company of men and women as you do now, but for the salvation of their souls will take upon yourself every kind of labour. Many people will be scandalized by the things you do and oppose you. . . ."

(Lamb 151)

Catherine's ability with words, to serve her so well with the Pope and the

Florentines, and used so powerfully in her many letters and in the *Dialogue* itself, she apparently acquired from her father Giacomo, a simple but virtuous man who “myght never suffre in his presence a man to curse hym wronge ne to speke of hym harme in no wyse. In soo moche that he blamed his wyf Lapa wyth softe wordes” (Caxton/de Worde, fol. 2v). That this softness of speech appeared feminine — or more than feminine — is suggested by the standard of virtuous speech toward which his *meyny*, the women who taught in his school, had to aspire, and by his daughter Bonaventura’s insistence that her own husband reform his speech. “Also this good manys softenes in speche was soo vertuous that alle his meyny namely wymmen damesels taught in his scole myght not speke ne heue noo worde that were not semely or dyshoneste” (Caxton/de Worde, fol. 3ra).

Catherine’s lowly social class, as determined by that of her father as a dyer, in the *Lyf* merges with that of her lowly gendered role in service to God, and is remarked upon both by Raymond and by the translator: “Ferthermore ye shall understande þat Jacob bsd the crafte of makyng of colours wherwyth wollen and wolle clothes ben dyed: This crafte bsd both he and his sonys. In that contree they ben called dyers, Wherfore full wonderfully god ordeyned that a dyers doughter shol be made the spouse of the Emperour of heven: As ye shall bee by goddes grace after in this boke” (Caxton/de Worde, fol. 3rb).

The manifest sexuality of the female “spouse,” whether of the Emperor of heaven or of an earthly man, is what Catherine as a child consciously attempted to flee from, conceal, or deny. As a child she wished to be called Eufrosyne, after the cross-dressing saint who dressed as a man, although Catherine also fled from the sight and conversation of men. One of her first miracles — when she flew through the air without her feet touching the grass — occurred “whanne she wolde flee a waye oute of companye and specyally from the syghte of companye of men” (Caxton/de Worde, fol. 5rb; see also fols. 8va and 9vb for similar desires on her part). Conscious of the fact that her gender will prove an obstacle to her if she enters the order of St. Dominic to help men’s souls — “From that tyme forward there went a grete desyre in hyr soule to go into that ordre that she myght profyte mannes sowle wyth other brethern of that ordre but by cause she sawe a greate obstacle in that she was a woman” (1.3, Caxton/de Worde, fol. 7rb) — like Eufrosyne she imagines she will wear the habit of a man and enter a monastery in some “ferre contree”: “Therfore she thought to folowe Saynt Eufrosyen as men cleppd hir in childhod wonderfully as for a pronostycacion that ryght as Saynt Eufrosyen feyned hyr a man and went in to a monastery of monkes in the same manere thys mayde is purposed to feyne hyr a man and go in to ferre contree where she was not knowe and take the abyte of the ordre of frere prechours where she myght helpe sowles and save them from perysshyng” (1.3, Caxton/de Worde, fol. 7rb; see figure eight, of Catherine in masculine garb and with cropped hair, from Oxford Bodleian MS. Canon. Misc. 205, fol. 7r). Although she does not in fact achieve this aim, she does cut off her hair and wear

both a *coyf* and a *kerchyf*, which is punished by her distressed mother through the withdrawal of her room and the demand that Catherine serve openly the entire house (Caxton/de Worde, fol. 10ra-10rb). Rebellious Catherine then vows never to leave the house again and makes a “pryve chaumbre” for herself in her own soul with the help of the Holy Ghost (Caxton/de Worde, fol. 10va). After St. Dominic appears to her in a vision she adopts the habit (1.7, Caxton/de Worde, fol. 15vb) and receives a mystical ring from God to signify herr wedding (1.12, Caxton/de Worde, fol. 28vb).

Only in the second part, on the “conversacion of this holy mayde with men,” is she graced with the ability to use words with men, powerfully, in the service of the Lord; in the first part she had been graced with the ability to read, like clerics (1.11, Caxton/de Worde, fol. 28va). Raymond acknowledges that, “Now is this a mervylous thyng She hadde not soo soone endeth her prayer but that she could rede lyuelye her psalmes as redely as she hadde ben ony kunnyng clerke” (1.11, Caxton/de Worde, fol. 28va). Again, this specific demand placed upon her by God and the grace of skillful words is also explicitly gendered by Catherine herself, who is conscious that women’s words mean little in this world: “Thou knowest well lord that men setten lytyll store by womens wordes speke þe neuer so uertuously as it were not semely. Ne lyuest thou that wymmen sholde be more conuersaunt amonges men” (2.1, Caxton/de Worde, fol. 30rb). Her acknowledgment of the inefficacy of women’s words anticipates the very charge leveled against St. Bridget of Sweden’s vernacular language, as rude and defective, during her canonization proceedings; Cardinal Adam Easton defended St. Bridget’s Rule by noting that monks and women are deficient in intellectual understanding and incapable of grasping the subtleties of the law of God, “moniales seu mulieres satis imbecillas intellectu et rudes ad capiendum subtilia legis dei” (Oxford, Bodleian MS. Hamilton 7, fol. 231).<sup>43</sup> God reminds her, in reply, that he transcends gender difference — that in him difference is not possible: “Am I he the whiche hathe made mankynde bothe man and woman and the shappe of every eyther. And when that I will enspyre myn grace is al one to me both men and woman” (2.1, Caxton/de Worde, fol. 30rb). Having said that, God adds his awareness that in this world and in his Church gender differences do apply. His idea is to use Catherine particularly as a gendered if spiritual educational tool, to teach proud men who cannot accept the efficacy of women’s words. “I shall send to theym saeell wymmen endelued graciously wyth myn dyuyne vertu in to confusyon & shame if theyr folly that been too proude” (Caxton/de Worde, fol. 30va). That this mission would have irritated

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<sup>43</sup> The “Epistolae duae de canonizatione sanctae Brigidae” (also found in a Lincoln Cathedral MS.), apparently composed after Easton’s imprisonment by Urban VI, sometime between 1389-91 (the date of the Canonization Commission), is discussed by Johnston 150-53. Easton also acknowledges the participation of women in the establishment of the Church and the appearance of Christ *corporaliter* to holy women after the Resurrection and at other times.



ecclesiastical men, in particular, is demonstrated, once again, by Cardinal Easton's defense of St. Bridget for establishing women's authority over men in her rule: against the charge that Christ forbade women to teach, or to speak in church, among other prohibitions, and that therefore St. Bridget was not permitted to speak in church, Easton responds that this is not true because at the time Christ declared to her the Rule and wished it to be made known through her, that men and women were both bound to the said Rule in the church or monasteries, to be serving perpetually ("Non apparet verisimile quod christus ore proprie dictavit regulam et eam voluerit publicari per mulierem quam apostolus in ecclesia loqui non permittit et tam viros quam mulieres illius ecclesie sive monasterii ad dictam regulam servandam perpetuo obligari"). He also argues that women can teach others privately, even if not publicly in church, and that that they were never forbidden to speak in church by St. Paul, only not to teach (fol. 232).

How God accomplishes his gendered goal occurs in Catherine's political and spiritual role in healing the Great Schism, chiefly through her prophecies during the rebellion of Italian cities against Pope Gregory II (1375) (in 2.10, Lamb 256-57); her desire for daily Communion and Pope Gregory's special dispensation of a priest and portable altar to her (Lamb 284); her work for Pope Gregory as ambassador to Florence, which had rebelled against the Church (she went in December of 1377 and stayed till July 1378, refusing to leave until Urban VI was elected on April 9, 1378, because Pope Gregory had died on March 27, 1377), after which peace was established (Lamb 303). In that same year, 1378, she completed her *Book of the Dialogue with Divine Providence* and Barduccio, Stefano de Maconi, and Neri di Landoccio transcribed it. Later she was summoned to Rome by Pope Urban VI, and in 1380 she died, at the age of thirty-three.

In the few early manuscript illuminations of Catherine found in testimonials about her or in one of the Latin legends, she usually appears holding a book from which a lily (St. Dominic's symbol) grows: in Oxford Bodleian MS. Canon. Misc. 205, fol. 1r, within a decorated initial "D" from the "Sermo de B. Catharina Senensi" by William the Englishman, she also holds a Christ in the other hand (figure nine); in Oxford Bodleian MS. Digby 180, fol. 1r, the short life of St. Catherine by Thomas of Siena, she holds a cross in the other (figure ten). Like Christ Catherine herself was a bridge between the human and divine, women and men, the lowest social class and the highest ecclesiastical position; like St. Dominic stamping out heresy, in her use of Siennese dialect she also bridges the gap between the humble vernacular and the learned Latin of the pontiff. The cultural bridging she achieved during her lifetime was also made manifest for another hundred and sixty years after her death by the fact of the spread of her writings and her influence as a female St. Dominic outside Italy, even to England and Scotland.



Figure 1. Cosimo Roselli, "St. Catherine of Siena as the Spiritual Mother of the Second and Third Orders of St. Dominic." By permission of the National Gallery of Scotland.

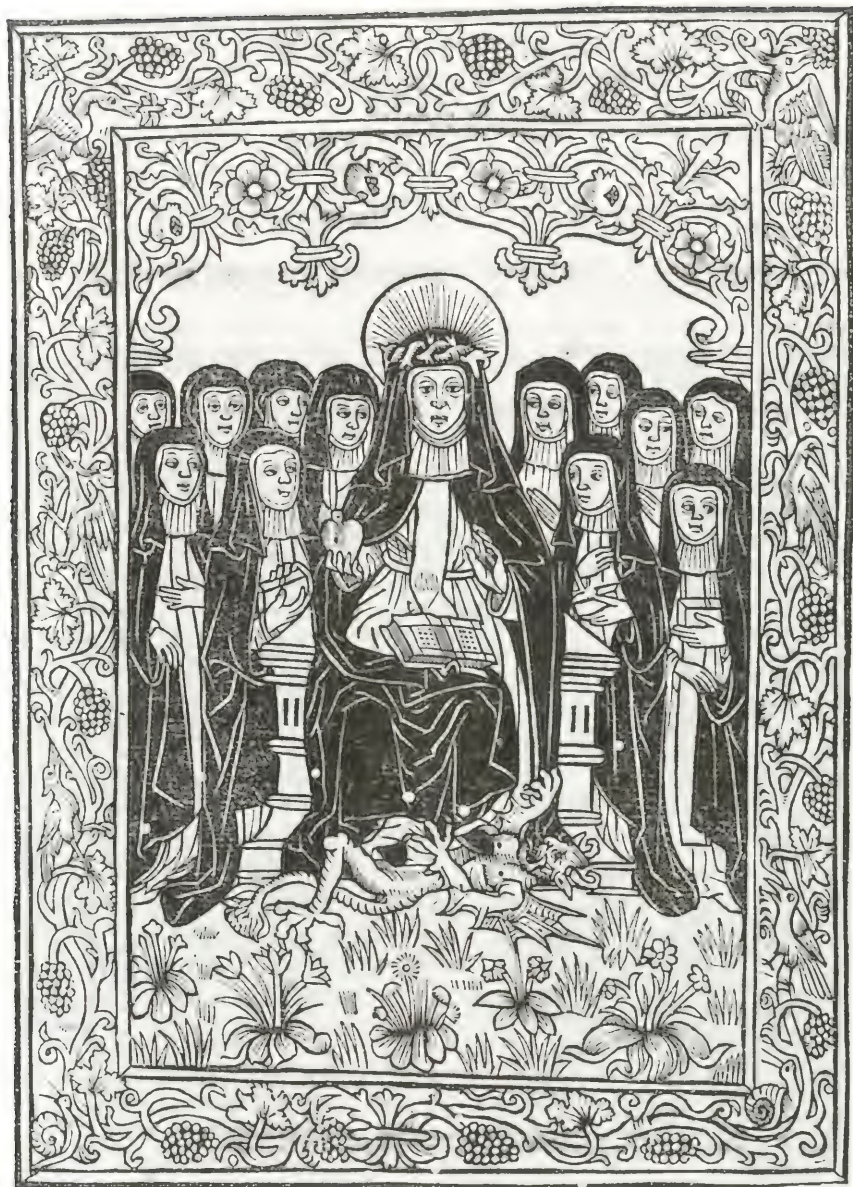


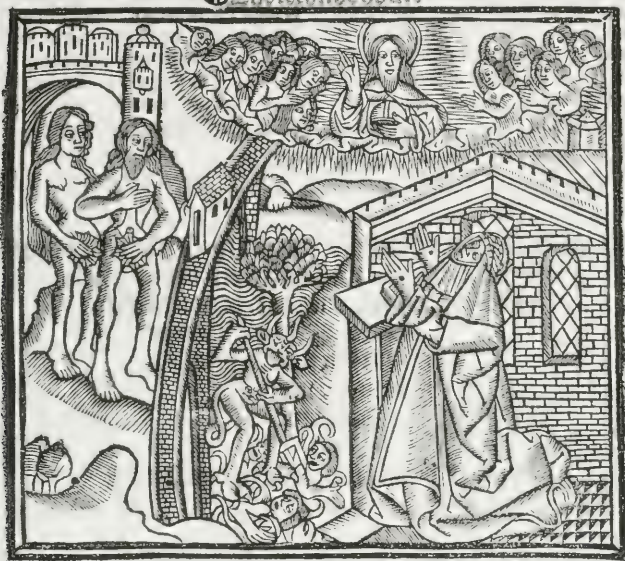
Figure 2. St. Catherine trampling the devil, with twelve mantled female figures. Frontispiece and illustration for opening of the seventh part of Wynken de Worde's 1519 edition of *The Orchard of Syon*. (c.11.B.6). By permission of the British Library.



## Secunda

**T**he fyrste chapytre of the seconde party maketh mency-  
on of a byrde; how god made a byrde of his sone. When the  
Waye of goynge to heuē was broke by inobeyence of Ada  
by þ which byrde / all trewe chryſtē people maye ouer passe.

**T**he seconde boke.



**A**lso how god lured and  
fyrred this soule to beholde  
the greatenes of this byrde;  
that is to say / how it reacheth  
fro þerthe to heuē. And here  
after shal folowe of the same  
mater / as it is shewed in the  
kalender before. **Ca. i.**



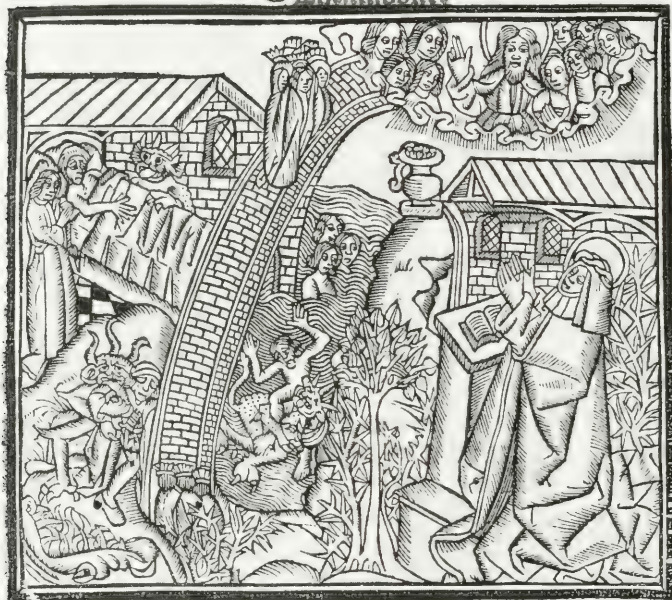
**D**aughter breause  
I dyd saye to the  
that I had made a  
byrde of my sone  
I wyl that it be vn  
knownen to you / þ  
the waye of my be  
loued sone is broke / by the inobey  
ence & trespas of Adam / in somoche  
þ no mā myght come to euer last þge

Figure 3. Christ as a bridge to God, with Adam and Eve and demons on either side, and St. Catherine to the right. Woodcut at the beginning of the second part, in Wynken de Worde's 1519 edition of *The Orchard of Syon*. (c.11.B.6). By permission of the British Library.

## Tertia.

**T**he fyfthe chapytre of the .iii. party / sheweth of þe profyte  
of temptacyons / and how every soule in þe last ende of his lyfe  
shall tast and fele by knowynge or he fully pas / What payne  
or ioye he shall haue after he is passed.

## The .iii. boke.



**A**lso how þe fende catcheth  
soules vnder the coloure of  
some goodnes / also this boke  
maketh mencyon of a bytyd  
that this blyssed byrgyn had  
with dyuers and many ma-  
ters / as it is reherced before  
the kalender.

Ca. k

**T**he fende a myny-  
tre ordryned of my  
ryghtwysenesse to  
tourment soules /  
whiche greuously  
offende me. **A**nd  
I ordeyned theym  
in this lyfe / that they sholde tempte  
and do grete greuaunce to my crea-  
tures. **N**ot for my creatures shol

Figure 4. Souls cross the bridge, while demons eat the damned, and St. Catherine praying, with an open book, to the right. Woodcut at the beginning of the third part, in Wynken de Worde's 1519 edition of *The Orchard of Syon*. (c.11.B.6). By permission of the British Library.

pars.

Ca. i.

**T**he fyfthe chapytre of the .iiii. party / speketh of prayre / & fyfthe in what maner a soule shal gouerne her / & the more come to pure soue and lyberall / and moche of this .iiii. parte / speketh of prayere and of terro.

**T**he fourthe boke.



**B**ut fyfthe god sheweth here a doctryne of the holy sacramēt of crystes body. And how a soule shal come fro bo call prayre / to mentall prayre With other maters as it is rehersed to you in the kalender before.

Ca. i.

**A**fter tyme a soule hath entred and gone by þ doctryne of cristes passyon / crucyfied w be ry loue of vertu / and hate of vyces / it stondeth with partyte perseruance / & samelye suche a soule that is partytely come to the house of his owne knowlege / abyde ynge myghtely and cōtynually in

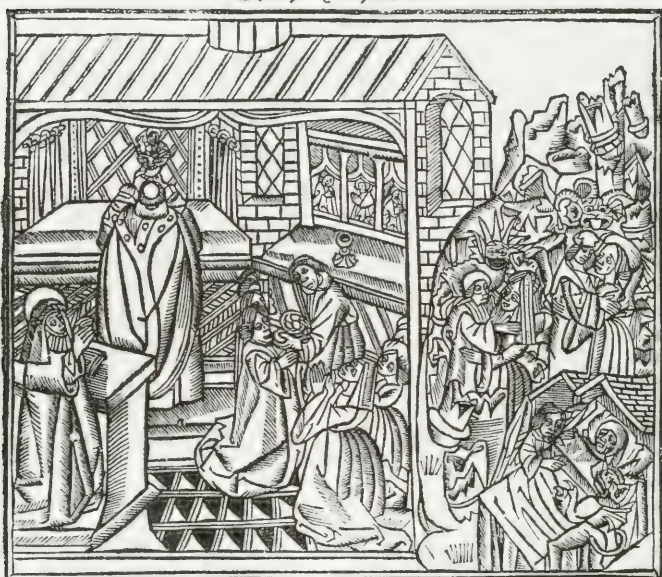
Figure 5. The bridge is linked with the celebration of the Host. Woodcut at the beginning of the fourth part, in Wynken de Worde's 1519 edition of *The Orchard of Syon*. (c.11.B.6). By permission of the British Library.



## Quinta

**T**he fyrst chapytre of þy fyfth pty speketh of moztifycacyō and fyrst of them that put theyr desyre more to sustre bodyly peyne / than in moztifycacyon or dystroyenge of theyr owne wyll / whiche is one parfytelyghte or lyghte of pfectcyō / more thā the generall lyghte / & it is the seconde lyght of parfeccyō.

**T**he fyfth boke.



**A**ls of þy thyde and more parfytelyghte of reason / and of the werkes þa soule dothe whā it is come to that state / and of many maters and dyuers / as it is reherled & shewed to the befoze in the kalender.

**Ca. f.**



**A**fter tyme þa soule is come and hath gotten this generall lyght (as I haue reherled befoze) she sholde not holde her apayde without more / for the whyle ye be in this lyfe as pylgrymes / ye be able for to receyue more & for to encrese not forthwarde / ye decrease goyge backwarde. **O**ther

Figure 6. Inside the church at the entrance to the bridge, the blessing of the Host, administering the Eucharist, St. Catherine kneeling in prayer, while outside demons consort with fornicating couples. Woodcut at the beginning of the fifth part, in Wynken de Worde's 1519 edition of *The Orchard of Syon*. (c.11.B.6). By permission of the British Library.

## Sexta

**T**he fyrte boke.

**T**he fyrst chaptyer spekyth of þe fyrte party; and it treateth moche of the prouydence of god; and fyrste of his prouydence generally; that is to say; how god prouydeh man to be man; & how he formed hym of noughte to his ymage and lykenesse.

**A**nd howe god prouydeh man to sauacyon with incarnacyon o þis sone; whan the gates of Paradyse were shyt for the synne of Adam.



**A**nd how he prouydeh hymselfe; gyuynge hymselfe continually to vs in the meet of the auter. **A**lso how god prouydeh to gyue hope in his creatures; & how he that mooste partlyethly hopeth; mooste fasteth the prouydence of god. **A**nd of other maters; sucche as be reherced to you before in the kalender.

Ca.i.

Figure 7. Communion administered to the faithful, Adam delving and Eve spinning at the left, the baking of bread to the right, with the Church as a ship saving those in a boat, all at the entrance to a church at the entrance to the bridge. Woodcut at the beginning of the sixth part, in Wynken de Worde's 1519 edition of *The Orchard of Syon*. (c.11.B.6). By permission of the British Library.

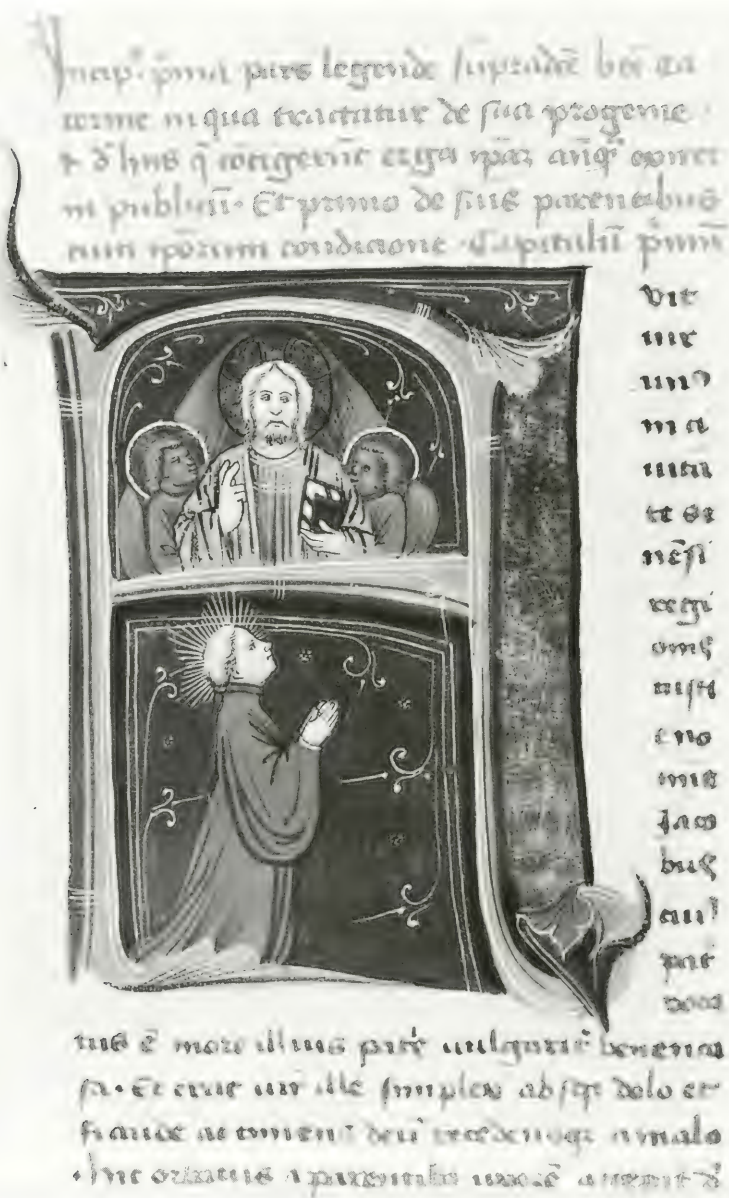


Figure 8. St. Catherine praying, with cropped hair and in masculine garb. MS. Canonici Miscellaneus 205, fol. 7r. By courtesy of The Bodleian Library, Oxford.





Figure 9. St. Catherine holds a lily in one hand, Christ in the other, within a decorated initial "D" from the *Sermo de B. Catharina Senensi* by William the Englishman. MS. Canonici Miscellaneus 205, fol. 1r. By courtesy of The Bodleian Library, Oxford.



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## L'amore per il mondo di una mistica del Quattrocento romano: Francesca Bussa dei Ponziani

L'introduzione del volume dedicato nel 1987 dagli "Annali d'Italianistica" a *Women's Voices in Italian Literature*, a firma di Rebecca West, ha titolo "A voce piena" e si conclude con queste parole: "These women's voices seek to converse, non to convert; to posit, non to preach. Please listen well."<sup>1</sup>

Sono parole che bene potrebbero convenire anche all'esperienza delle scrittrici mistiche italiane, e in particolar modo a quella di Francesca Bussa dei Ponziani, più comunemente nota come santa Francesca Romana, vissuta a Roma tra il 1384, data di nascita, e il 1440, anno in cui morì.<sup>2</sup>

Francesca Romana, infatti, per tutta la sua vita cercò di conversare con il mondo più che convertirlo, di prendere posizione rispetto ad esso a partire dal proprio vissuto interiore piuttosto che predicare pubblicamente. Ciò non toglie che essa, come tutte le mistiche, abbia parlato "a voce piena", quando non addirittura a voce spiegata: perché la parola di Francesca Romana come quella di tutte le mistiche possiede una potenza espressiva di rara forza e pregnanza, che stupisce sia passata per lo più inosservata, a parte qualche luminosa eccezione, al vaglio dei critici. Occorre ascoltarla attentamente per cogliere gli elementi di grande vitalità espressiva che la caratterizzano: quando è stato fatto, ha portato a risultati meritori come l'antologia dedicata alle *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*,<sup>3</sup> pubblicata qualche anno fa con un titolo coraggioso, perché attribuisce alle parole dell'estasi delle mistiche italiane lo statuto di scrittura.

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<sup>1</sup> West, "A voce piena": *An Introduction to Women's Voices in Italian Literature* 15.

<sup>2</sup> Su Francesca Romana vedi la voce in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, V, 1011-1027; la voce nella *Enciclopedia cattolica*, V, 1567-1570; *Santa Francesca Romana nella Storia e nell'Arte* (1384-1908), numero monografico della "Rivista storica benedettina", 3 (1908); Picasso (a c. di), *Una santa tutta romana*.

<sup>3</sup> Pozzi e Leonardi (a c. di), *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*. D'ora in poi rimandi a questo volume verranno fatti nel testo citando il nome dei due curatori.



Dato questo non scontato, perché per moltissime delle mistiche medievali (ma non solo), complesso risulta decifrare il rapporto con la scrittura che esse intrattennero nel corso del loro intenso dialogare con il divino, e tramite il divino, con il mondo: chiunque si avvicini ad un testo che la tradizione ha tramandato come rispondente alle parole di una mistica, si trova dinanzi il problema di a chi appartenga quella scrittura, che cosa in essa e in quale quantità è fedele all'esperienza che l'ha prodotta. Problema filologicamente non irrilevante se si cerca di rispettare la questione autoriale e che infatti, non a caso, pone seri ostacoli alle edizioni critiche di molti dei testi delle mistiche italiane:<sup>4</sup> edizioni insidiose non solo per la mole del materiale esistente, veramente considerevole, e per lo stato della tradizione manoscritta, spesso molto difficile da dipanare, ma anche per la problematica connessa alla volontà di autrici che meditavano a voce alta (a voce piena, appunto), dettando e scrivendo, tanto che a questo proposito Giovanni Pozzi ha parlato di un "metodo del meditare scrivendo".<sup>5</sup>

Un metodo di frontiera, al punto che le mistiche italiane poco o nulla sono state considerate scrittrici, anche se la loro parola possiede una valenza poetica rara, tutta scavata sul limite del linguaggio, della possibilità espressiva. Il rapporto controverso che le mistiche intrattengono con il linguaggio, e tanto più con quella forma inesorabile e per un certo verso indelebile che è la scrittura, dà quasi a pensare per quanto riguarda la figura del trascrittore — quando non si tratta di trascrittrici, come nel caso di Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi — che essa sia figura necessaria per valicare una distanza di senso di cui l'io narrante non assume *in primis* la responsabilità, avocandola, almeno quella, almeno in parte, ad altri o altre.

In altri termini, il rapporto con la scrittura nel caso delle mistiche italiane risulta esercitato attraverso una mediazione mai compiuta nell'isolamento dal mondo, quanto in una solitudine interiore feconda di parole raccolte sovente proprio dalle donne che vivevano accanto all'estatica: a partire da Chiara d'Assisi nelle lettere ad Agnese da Praga (Pozzi-Leonardi 62-69), per passare poi alle parole di Umiliana Cerchi di cui dà testimonianza la fedele compagna di nome Picilia (Pozzi-Leonardi 83), come alla anonima compagna che sostiene Margherita da Cortona nel piegare, esausta, la testa sul guanciale (Pozzi-Leonardi 123), così come anonima risulta essere la compagna che aiuta Angela da Foligno a sostenersi con il cibo (Pozzi-Leonardi 159; vedi anche Angela da Foligno, *Il libro dell'esperienza* 81-82, 167, 198). Gli esempi potrebbero moltiplicarsi, ricordando Giacomina, la compagna di Benvenuta Boianni che ne raccoglie le rivelazioni insieme alla sorella di Benvenuta Maria (Pozzi-Leonardi 183), alla comunità conventuale in grande pena per la salute di Chiara da Montefalco (Pozzi-Leonardi 207), alla narrazione delle compagne di Villana de' Botti (Pozzi-

<sup>4</sup> Esemplare per correttezza esegetica l'edizione approntata da Antonazzi, *Caterina Paluzzi e la sua autobiografia (1573-1645)*.

<sup>5</sup> Pozzi, *L'alfabeto delle sante*, in Pozzi e Leonardi (a c. di), *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* 23.

Leonardi 215, 219), alle "sociae", come le ha definite Sara Cabibbo,<sup>6</sup> che si assumono la cura della protezione fisica, ma anche spirituale, di Caterina da Siena.

Almeno fino all'età moderna il rapporto delle mistiche con la scrittura reca spesso il segno forte di una presenza di una o più donne che ne sostengono l'esperienza con un conforto che è insieme anche garanzia di sopravvivenza nella narrazione della esperienza stessa. Fino all'età moderna, perché, a parte il caso particolarissimo di Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, la cui parola ci è arrivata grazie allo sforzo sovrumano delle sue consorelle,<sup>7</sup> sia per la diffusione dell'alfabetizzazione (ma la questione se molte delle mistiche medievali sapessero leggere e scrivere risulta a tutt'oggi piuttosto controversa e lascia parecchi dubbi sul reale analfabetismo di queste donne), soprattutto la presenza post-tridentina della figura del direttore spirituale cambia la questione e la filtra con connotati a volte anche piuttosto inquietanti.<sup>8</sup> Con tutto ciò, ancora nella prima metà del Novecento Lucia Mangano nella sua autobiografia scrive con esplicito affetto dell'amica Maria Scalia, che non la lasciava mai sola (Pozzi-Leonardi 660-661), a dimostrazione dell'importanza fondativa di una relazione recante sostegno non solo all'esistenza materiale e interiore dell'esperienza mistica, ma anche alla possibilità stessa che essa divenga scrittura attraverso gli stili che le sono più propri, gli epistolari come le autobiografie, i diari come i trattati.

Fortunatamente, almeno per quanto riguarda i *Tractati della vita e delli visioni di S. Francesca Romana*, l'interesse per il volgare romanesco della metà del secolo XV ha pesato positivamente a favore della pubblicazione dei testi di Francesca Romana, forse dettati e comunque raccolti da Giovanni Mattiotti, suo confessore e trascrittore più o meno fedele delle parole della santa. Già nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento Mariano Armellini pubblicò la *Vita di S. Francesca Romana scritta nell'idioma volgare di Roma del secolo XV*, tratta da un manoscritto dell'Archivio Segreto Apostolico Vaticano,<sup>9</sup> recante la data 1469 e contenente *Lo tractato delli miracoli et visioni della nostra sancta matre beata Francesca; Lo tractato delle baccaglie che essa beata abe dalli maligni spiriti; Lo tractato como essa beata fu menata in spirito dallo angillo Raphaello ad vedere lo luoco dello inferno; Lo tractato como essa beata fu menata dallo sopradicto angilo Raphaello a vedere lo luoco de purgatorio; Lo tractato dello felice obito de essa beata; Le laude facte ad essa beata Francesca*.<sup>10</sup> A qualche anno di distanza Mario Pelaez intervenne sui criteri adottati da Armellini nell'edizione del codice

<sup>6</sup> Cabibbo, *Introduzione a Caterina da Siena, Io, serva e schiava* 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Vedi Pozzi, *Introduzione a Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, Le parole dell'estasi* 22-25.

<sup>8</sup> Vedi quanto scrive al proposito Modica Vasta, *La scrittura mistica*, in Scaraffia e Zarri (a c. di), *Donne e fede* 375-398.

<sup>9</sup> Città del Vaticano, Archivio Segreto Apostolico, AA. Arm. I-XVIII; vedi Armellini, *Prefazione alla Vita di S. Francesca Romana*.

<sup>10</sup> Armellini, *Vita di S. Francesca Romana*, Indice.

vaticano con una serie di annotazioni critiche,<sup>11</sup> e proponendo una trascrizione più corretta sotto il profilo linguistico dei due *Tractati dell'inferno e del purgatorio*;<sup>12</sup> di recente Ugo Vignuzzi (*Varianti e registri linguistici nei due testimoni quattrocenteschi* 827-839) è tornato sulla questione, ricordando che già dagli inizi del secolo si conosce un altro testimone dei *Tractati*, conservato presso l'Archivio del monastero di Tor de' Specchi,<sup>13</sup> il quale però, non differendo sostanzialmente ma formalmente da quello dell'Archivio vaticano, sembra costituire l'esemplare destinato ad una fruizione interna alla comunità delle Oblate, mentre il codice vaticano da diversi indizi potrebbe risultare essere l'esemplare destinato ad un uso pubblico in vista del processo di canonizzazione di Francesca Romana.<sup>14</sup> Vignuzzi ha anche annunciato (*Per la definizione della scripta romanesca "di tipo medio" nel sec. XV* 51) di stare approntando insieme con Rossella Incarbone Giornetti un'edizione critica dei *Tractati*, di cui ha fornito un primo estratto con la pubblicazione dei due trattati già proposti da Pelaez, ma rivisitati secondo criteri moderni e collazionando i manoscritti esistenti (*Per la definizione della scripta romanesca "di tipo medio" nel sec. XV* 54-130). In attesa della meritoria edizione, che comunque costituisce il punto di arrivo di un ritorno di interesse critico per i testi di Francesca Romana soprattutto dal punto di vista linguistico,<sup>15</sup> il riferimento è ancora all'edizione di Armellini, tenendo conto però delle correzioni di Pelaez e di Vignuzzi; mentre per quanto riguarda la versione in volgare e probabilmente coadiuvata da interventi esterni,<sup>16</sup> il rimando è all'imponente edizione critica curata da Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli (*Santa Francesca Romana. I trattati latini di Giovanni Mattiotti*).

Di fatto, di Francesca Romana non ci è pervenuto alcuno scritto autografo, mentre ricca ed ampia risulta invece essere la scrittura che narra la sua esperienza, rispetto alla quale non si può che concordare con Ugo Vignuzzi (*Varianti e registri linguistici nei due testimoni quattrocenteschi* 827, nota 1) quando opta per la scelta della denominazione globale di *Tractati*, là dove Armellini li aveva intitolati *Vita di S. Francesca Romana*, e Pelaez *Visioni di s. Francesca Romana*: oltre al dato non irrilevante che il manoscritto vaticano reca nella tavola iniziale il termine *Tractati*, questa scelta sembra essere maggiormente rispondente alla volontà stessa di Francesca, che se non scrisse di sua mano

<sup>11</sup> Pelaez, *Visioni di s. Francesca Romana* 365-370.

<sup>12</sup> Pelaez, *Visioni di s. Francesca Romana* 371-409; 252-263.

<sup>13</sup> Di cui aveva dato notizia Lugano, *Santa Francesca Romana nella memoria dei contemporanei e dei posteri* 123, nota 2. Cfr. Brasò, *Identificazione delle fonti autografe della biografia di Santa Francesca Romana* 165-171.

<sup>14</sup> Vignuzzi, *Varianti e registri linguistici* 831-832 e n. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Vedi le pagine che hanno dedicato alla questione Bruni, *Appunti sui movimenti religiosi* 14-16; Bruni, *L'Italiano* 344-348; Trifone, *Roma e il Lazio* 567-569.

<sup>16</sup> Vedi quanto ne scrive Tagliabue, *Francesca Romana nella storiografia* 208.



questi testi, li enunciò in maniera tale da presentare un carattere compiuto e finito rispondente, volontariamente o non, ai criteri di stesura di uno o più trattati.

Infatti, Francesca Romana dettò o altrimenti scrisse moltissimo:<sup>17</sup> per oltre dieci anni narrò a Giovanni Mattiotti la propria esperienza estatica, confluita poi nel *Tractato delli miracoli et visioni della nostra sancta matre Francesca*, contenente le visioni estatiche avvenute tra il 1430 e il 1440, insieme al *Tractato che describe le battaglie tra Francesca e gli spiriti maligni*; fino a giungere ai trattati dedicati all'inferno e al purgatorio, veri e propri itinerari agli inferi, non a caso i più studiati e letti nelle loro possibili connessioni con la *Commedia* dantesca;<sup>18</sup> le parti invece relative alla sua morte e le laudi in suo onore sono sicuramente ascrivibili a parole diverse dalla sua e appartengono alla incipiente letteratura agiografica sulla santa.<sup>19</sup>

Che gli scritti di Francesca Romana possedessero un carattere compiuto era già stato intuito da Pelaez, il quale a questo proposito scrisse che “questi tractati possono adunque per un certo rispetto considerarsi come altrettante operette” (*Visioni di s. Francesca Romana* 368), e da Zabughin, che notò come “quella di Francesca è ‘visione’, sì, ma salda ed ubbidiente alle leggi di una ferrea logica, punto meno rigorosamente simmetrica di quella di Dante, ma intenta a persuadere oltreché a terrificare” (*Paradiso, Inferno e Purgatorio nella visione di Santa Francesca Romana* 38). Ma mentre piuttosto studiate risultano essere le fonti letterarie e non delle sue visioni — e Ornella Moroni ha opportunamente collocato la vicenda dell'estatica tra Medioevo e Rinascimento (*Le visioni di Santa Francesca Romana tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*) —, poco è stata indagata la tensione inesausta di Francesca Romana a fare della propria parola stile enunciativo, dettato mistico originale ed elaborato. Che si svolge nel segno di un complesso processo di conoscenza interiore, a partire dalla infanzia di Francesca, così ricordata da Giovanni Mattiotti all'inizio del *Tractato della vita et delli visioni*:

Ad honore dello glorioso signore eterno dio et ad hedificatione et instructione del anime. Io prete Janni indegno patre spirituale della devota ancilla dello excelso signore dio della beata francesca manifestaragio alcuna cosa che ad mia notitia è venuta dalla vita et dalle gratie le quale esso summo signore li ao facte, la quale beata francesca fò figlia dello nobile citadino romano chiamato Pavolo Bussa, et della nobile donna romana chiamata madonna Jacovella delli rofredeschi. La quale beata francesca dalla soa

<sup>17</sup> Per una descrizione tipologica vedi Morino, *Note ed appunti sulla letteratura romanesca* 516-524.

<sup>18</sup> Vedi Bartoccetti, *Le fonti della Visione di Santa Francesca Romana*; Monaci, *La Divina Commedia e le visioni di Santa Francesca Romana*; Zabughin, *Paradiso, Inferno e Purgatorio nella visione di Santa Francesca Romana*.

<sup>19</sup> Su cui vedi Barone, *La canonizzazione di Francesca Romana* (1608).

piccolezza fo honestissima e schifa sopra lo humano modo.

(Armellini, *Vita* 1)

Se interessante risulta questa dichiarazione di Mattiotti di costituire lo strumento “materiale” dell’enunciato di Francesca e attraverso le sue parole della volontà divina, l’essere dell’estatica fin dalla tenerissima età riservata ed onesta diviene maggiormente significativo a fronte della malattia nella quale cadde la ragazza allorché, dodicenne, fu promessa sposa al marito, “chiamato Rienzo delli pontiani nobile cittadino romano” (Armellini, *Vita* 2). Durante la malattia Francesca ebbe una visione:

Et la seguente nocte li venne in visione lo glorioso sancto Alexo in forma de bello giovine venendo lo die della soa festa doi fiате li disse cotali parole. Vuoi tu essere sanata et esse beata respondendo che voleva quello che piaceva al dio subito fu sanata et liberata et la matina rizzandose chiamò la soa intima cognata Vannoza et ammirata Vannoza per che sempre li aiutava per la grande infirmità disse, si tu Ceccolella.

(Armellini, *Vita* 2)

La chiamata divina, è da sottolineare, non si iscrive in un quadro di mortificazione del corpo bensì di sanità corporea e beatitudine spirituale; in questo contesto spiccano però soprattutto le parole della cognata Vannoza che chiama Francesca a se stessa, nel nome della intimità affettuosa in cui la riconosce di nuovo intera con quel “Si tu Ceccolella”, nella forma diretta dell’*invocatio*. È insieme a Vannoza che Francesca Romana percorre i primi passi della adesione via via più consapevole al dettato mistico:

Anche tornando uno die essa beata colla dicta cognata dalla chiesa de sancto Pietro, et per lo grande calore avendo gran volontà de bere, como forono alla chiesa de sancto Leonardo scesero allo tevere, et volendo pigliar del acqua cascaro insieme nello fiume, et stando merse nel acqua et menandole l’acqua, per lo grande amore che se avevano se tenevano colle mani insieme, et perché intimamente se amavano, la beata se doleva della morte de Vannoza più che della soa propria, et Vannoza della morte della beata ancilla de Cristo, onde essendo menate dallo fiume non se avidero se non come se trovarono in terra bagnate. Le quali doi dilectissime cognate stettero insieme quasi trenta et octo anni in tanta unione et con tanto mirabile amore, che infra esse non fu mai discordia ne grande ne piccola, ma erano de uno core et de una anima.

(Armellini, *Vita* 2-3)

L’episodio narrato non può essere letto in chiave esclusivamente agiografica: sebbene il Tevere fosse a quel tempo a Roma una presenza infida, l’accento è posto da Francesca Romana non sul miracolo presunto della salvezza dalle acque delle due cognate, quanto sul grande amore che le univa (“perché intimamente se

amavano”), tanto che l’una era in pena per l’altra, sul loro “mirabile amore”, sul loro essere “de uno core et de una anima”. È l’affetto reciproco, la loro relazione, ciò che sostiene le due donne nel desiderio di vivere appartate dalla famiglia e dal vincolo del matrimonio, ma anche nel distribuire ai poveri durante una carestia le vettovaglie contenute nei magazzini di proprietà dei rispettivi mariti. Curiosamente, il miracolo avviene in relazione alla possibilità di nascondere gli atti pietosi (ma insensati secondo la morale corrente) delle due cognate: infatti i mariti delle due donne quando vanno a cercare il grano lo trovano al suo posto e così il vino (Armellini, *Vita* 3).

Mentre la descrizione che Mattiotti fa della vita della mistica risponde ai dettami della santità esemplare (la frugalità nel cibo, la pratica dell’orazione quotidiana e notturna, l’esercizio delle penitenze e della disciplina, la smemoratezza estatica), il racconto delle visioni che gradualmente introducono Francesca Romana all’esperienza mistica diviene sempre più circostanziato e preciso. Quando Francesca descrive a Mattiotti lo splendore dell’angelo che sempre le era accanto, fornisce esempi dettagliati:

Allo quale splendore essa angelica ancilla de Cristo poteva ben continuamente aguardare como per exempio non potendo noi aguardare allocchio dello sole per lo grande splendore, tamen potemo aguardare bene assiduamente lo suo lustro. Et ad ciò che meglio potessi io comprendere, essa beata me devo tale exempio. Como quando lomo a li suoi occhi corporali sani, vede et penetra meglio luocchio del sole, et poi che diventano caliginosi non pò così bene aguardarli et advenga che nolla pozza così ben vedere, tamen sì bene che è molto più lucente che li suoi occhi non possono vedere per la infirmità; et così e della forma corporea angelica, che advenga che la pretiosa anima non potessi guardare in esso angilo per la grandissima charità tamen essa ben intendeva et comprendeva che essa angelica forma era più lucente, che li suoi occhi corporali non potevano vedere.

(Armellini, *Vita* 12)

Evidente l’intento di Francesca Romana di fare della sua esperienza parola, se non dettato a Giovanni Mattiotti, il quale chiosa questa ed altre visioni affermando che l’estatica possedeva “lo intellecto spirituale lo quale aveva da dio per singularissimo dono” (Armellini, *Vita* 17): intelletto, quindi, non accoglimento passivo dei segreti divini, anche se a questo proposito torna il *topos* della reticenza femminile rispetto alla manifestazione pubblica del proprio vissuto, che Francesca “non voleva che fussi manifesto” (Armellini, *Vita* 18). Nonostante ciò, le descrizioni che Francesca Romana fa delle proprie visioni sono ricche di esempi e di spiegazioni che cercano di rendere il senso profondo di quanto essa ha esperito, tanto che “quando la humile ancilla de Cristo recetava tale visione, tucta se infiammava como seraphica non potendo esprimere secunno che aveva veduto” (Armellini, *Vita* 21). A ulteriore comprova della tensione alla memoria



di sé attraverso il circuito sonoro della parola mistica, nei *Tractati* sono presenti in modo non episodico lasse rimate come quella recitata da Francesca Romana nel corso di una visione avvenuta nel mese di aprile 1431:

Avendo reciputo lo sanctissimo sacramento la humile ancilla de Cristo nella sopradicta cappella, stecte in extasi per spatio de una hora, sempre immobile; in tal muodo che in essa non era altra mutatione salvo che sbacteva li occhi et po manjandose incominciò a parlare dicendo. O amore si traditore, non me fare partire da voi, lassime in questi dolori, io non ce voglio stare piune. Amor non me lassare nelle tenebre habitare, ché non ce posso più stare. Dimme la cascione che me fa partire da voi. Le quali parole io colla compagna ben odiemmo, et così le scriveva.

(Armellini, *Vita* 24)

O, ancora, mentre Francesca si intrattiene durante una visione con la Madonna e con Cristo bambino ("lo signore piccolino quasi de octo mesi tanto bello et amabile"; Armellini, *Vita* 38) ode una voce di cui ripete nell'estasi le parole: "Ama chi te ama, et ama chi te avo amato, amore ve ch'amore a acciato, amor ch'te ama te a si legato, factote infiammare et a te innamorato" (Armellini, *Vita* 39). E conclude: "Lo amore te ama te fa trasformare, fa te pasmare se tu nollo trovi. Lo amore che te ama te a essere virile, fa te in alto sallire per farte venire con esso amore che te a legato" (Armellini, *Vita* 39).

La particolarità della presenza costante di versi rimati (che rimandano al repertorio delle laudi medievali) nei vari *Tractati* attribuiti alla santa, sottolinea, già nelle parole stesse di Mattiotti ("et così le scriveva"), la voce originale di Francesca, come si evince anche da un passo in cui essa riferisce le parole della Madonna a Mattiotti quasi dettandogliele, tanto che egli commenta: "Et vedendo la devota anima tali infiammativi e penetrativi muodi udivo la gloriosa regina che disse con dolceissima melodia" (Armellini, *Vita* 26). La Madonna invita anche Francesca Romana ad essere "virile", con un termine che a tutta prima suona strano, ma che in realtà risponde alla tensione di Francesca Romana a fare della propria esperienza, tutta dipanata tra umano e divino, tra estasi e pratica religiosa, parola, e parola scritta, con fermezza e virilità nei termini dell'epoca: "et poi disse alla devota ancilla del signore. O anima che sta sempre sopra la mira, voi che cercando i fructi della sapientia divina fa che ne stai abisata de poterli mantenere, che non sia nulla cosa che te faccia partire. Fa che si virile et anche pellegrina, guardate da lato che non te venga la piena, che non te faccia riunare per la cervice tea" (Armellini, *Vita* 26-27); e aggiunge in un'altra occasione che la "pura fede che è virile vola innanzi allo summo bene te la ferma et nolla fa partire" (Armellini, *Vita* 36).

Una parola, quella di Francesca Romana, che ha grande cura degli strumenti espressivi, dimostrata oltre che dalla presenza di un numero ingente di versi polimetri, dalla cura dei dialoghi, come quello che intercorre nel tempio tra la Madonna e suo figlio durante la visione del febbraio 1432, di grande realismo e

vivacità (Armellini, *Vita* 68-69); dalla grande ed originale potenza espressiva di immagini come quella della “gloriosa vergine Maria gravida” (Armellini, *Vita* 47), appartenente alla visione del Natale 1431.

È stato notato che Francesca Romana dimostra di possedere una “intimità con il divino”<sup>20</sup> che colpisce per la semplicità e l’agio con cui viene narrata: splendida la visione in cui “la divina ancilla infra li dicti rami in extasi e secunno li segni teneva lo signore piccolecto nelle braccia, con mirabile jubilo, cantando melodiosi laudationi” (Armellini, *Vita* 159). Una adesione al divino intimamente vissuta che era stata incoraggiata e sostenuta dalla cognata Vannoza e che trae ulteriore sostegno dalla comunità di donne riunita da Francesca nel 1525 presso Santa Maria Nova nel Foro Romano, a cui essa si appoggia, da cui trae conforto per il proprio viaggio nell’esperienza estatica. La comunità era inizialmente costituita da dieci donne oltre a Francesca Romana: i loro nomi sono Anastasia Clarelli, Agnese Lelli, Anastasia Lelli Petrucci, Iacobella Brunamonti, Perna Colucci e sua figlia Agostina, Caterina Manetti, Vannoza Marroccini, Rita Lelli, Francesca da Veroli.<sup>21</sup> Pur continuando a vivere in famiglia e mantenendo quindi uno stretto contatto con il mondo, questo gruppo di donne pregava e meditava insieme, fuori dalle regole canoniche e con caratteristiche che sono state indagate con perizia da Anna Esposito nella sua interessante ricognizione delle comunità religiose femminili romane nel Quattrocento (*S. Francesca e le comunità religiose femminili a Roma nel secolo XV* 537-562).

L’importanza che questo gruppo di donne riveste nel processo di consapevolezza estatica che Francesca Romana vive durante l’approfondimento della propria esperienza interiore è documentato da quanto riportato da Mattiotti a proposito di una piaga di Francesca: “Et la dicta piaga fu manifesta ad certe delle soe figliole, molto secrete et unite con essa beata perché era necessità che fussi ajutata certe fiate. Le quali soe figliole fuero et so, Annese, Rita, Vannoza soa cognata sopradicta nel principio” (Armellini, *Vita* 34). Indicative le parole usate da Mattiotti per le “soe figliole, molto secrete et unite con essa beata”, quasi a descrivere una relazione di cui il confessore non riesce a penetrare il segreto né le caratteristiche. Che vanno tutte però verso un rafforzamento dell’esperienza interiore di Francesca Romana e della sua autorevolezza nei confronti della città di Roma. Non a caso, quando la Beata Vergine guarisce miracolosamente la piaga, “la divina ancilla disse. Te è piaciuto di sanarme perché sia più potente. Le quali parole udì Io colla sopradicta Rita” (Armellini, *Vita* 55).

È nel corso della visione del 20 marzo 1432 che San Gregorio invita Francesca Romana a imitare l’ape, a creare un alveare, in altri termini a fare della comunità di donne di cui fa parte una comunità monastica a tutti gli effetti:

<sup>20</sup> La definizione è di Bartolomei Romagnoli, *Lo tractato delli miracoli et visioni* 401.

<sup>21</sup> Vedi Lugano, *I processi inediti per Francesca Bussa dei Ponziani* XIII.

Pigli bene lo exempio dallo lapo pretioso, che va ad pigliare lo luoco dove possa fructificare. Puoi che la trovato, la famiglia sence fà pigli animosità con reale potestà, faccia como lo capo quanno la famiglia vole congregava che senne va allo fiore et lo suco ne va ad pigliare, vase nello suo cubicolo et fa lo fortificare. Questo ve ad dicere lo cupiello dello mele ad ciascheduno da officio, et le caselle fa fare. Puoi che esso li a reduci tucti nelli suoi luochi fali moltiplicare, et lo fructo ne produce, tucti li fa stare uniti in caritate, questo è lo bello fructo che produce la humiltà.

(Armellini, *Vita* 77)

Nelle visioni successive sarà la Vergine stessa ad appoggiare personalmente l'iniziativa operosa di Francesca Romana e delle sue compagne, ad insistere sull'originalità della comunità religiosa, sulla sua indipendenza da qualsiasi regola esistente, a scegliere e a comunicare a Francesca il nome, "Oblate di Maria Vergine" (Armellini, *Vita* 160); a darne infine i contorni e i caratteri, disponendo che "tucte quante le chiamate, vergine et vedove de qualunca etade, della obediencia le affranchete che dicano che lamino in veritate, tucte quante aco etade de dicere lo si et lo no, vedi che siano contente tucte insiemi de buono core, che agiano buone spalle de ciò chesse dice de fora" (Armellini, *Vita* 161).

Come ha ricordato Giulia Barone (*Società e religiosità femminile* 107), in Francesca Romana convivono molti aspetti, diversissimi fra loro: essa è mistica ma anche profeta, madre e moglie, ma al tempo stesso fondatrice della comunità delle Oblate di Tor de' Specchi. Le lotte intestine che divamparono a Roma provocando carestia e guerre travolsero la famiglia dei Ponziani e molti cittadini romani, ma non Francesca Romana, che organizzò la distribuzione di viveri ai bisognosi e prestò la propria opera di assistenza negli ospizi della città. Il 25 marzo 1433, festa liturgica dell'Annunciazione della Vergine, il gruppo si adunò nella Torre de' Specchi, ai piedi del Campidoglio, ottenendo il riconoscimento di papa Eugenio IV nel luglio dello stesso anno, con una larga autonomia decisionale per quanto riguardava l'elezione delle proprie superiori, l'accettazione di nuove adepti, la scelta del cappellano per la somministrazione dei sacramenti. Francesca Romana si unì a loro dopo la morte del marito, avvenuta nel 1436.

Probabilmente è proprio da questo stretto rapporto di comunanza spirituale ed esperienziale che Francesca trasse la forza per fare della propria parola scrittura e scrittura pubblica: l'amore per il mondo, ma non per la mondanità, che queste donne dimostrano nell'esercizio di una pratica di carità non superficiale, infatti, è lo stesso che permea le parole che Francesca Romana rivolge a papa Eugenio IV e che ne fanno una santa tutta romana,<sup>22</sup> accuratamente rivolta ad una città travagliata da conflitti locali di spaventosa devastazione. In una visione del mese di luglio 1430 viene assalita da ventisette demoni che le dicono: "Questa è la

<sup>22</sup> Fondamentali a questo proposito gli studi di Esch, *Santa Francesca Romana ed il suo ambiente sociale a Roma* 33-55; Esch sta inoltre attendendo alla voce *Francesca Romana* per il *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, di prossima pubblicazione.



justitia o vero la ira de dio la quale manda nella città de roma per la grande iniquità che in essa opera” (Armellini, *Vita* 19). Ancora, Francesca Romana racconta a proposito della visione occorsale nell’aprile 1431, che il suo spirito era stato portato su di un monte altissimo, sul quale era posta una colonna “grandissima e lucentissima” (Armellini, *Vita* 24), dalla cui sommità scaturiva un fuoco ardentissimo, l’amore divino, il quale si separava in tre lingue di fuoco, una diretta al cielo, l’altra che si spandeva sul monte, la terza invece su una grande folla lì riunita:

Stando essa beata sopra la base o vero pede della colonna et però vedeva ne tucto l’altro puopolo lo quale puopolo era spartuto in quattro parti. Et vide lo amore che stava appresso ad una parte del puopolo et non era accettato, et quelli li quali renunsavano lo amore, stavano tenebrosi et lordi, et era grande parte dello puopolo; et alla seconda parte dello puopolo li stava lo amore sopra et non era apprezzato, et stavano colle facce voltate. Et alla terza parte anche lo amore li stava sopra ma stavano pigri et tiepidi ad recevello. Alla quarta parte lo amore li stava sopra et da essi era accettato et honorato non però quanto se conveniva li quali erano pochissimi. Et adomandando Io quanta era questa ultima parte ad respecto de tucto laltro puopolo essa beata disse, como ad respecto delle primi erano quasi uno per ciento. Et stando essa con grande confuorso allo base della colonna udì una voce la quale gessiva dalla colonna che diceva: Io sò amore, amore che davo lamore, amore che sosteno lamore. Amore la fa capace, amore la fa infiammare, amore la fa tirare che essa non se ne andasse.

(Armellini, *Vita* 24-25)

La descrizione dettagliata che Francesca Romana adotta per enunciare il proprio pensiero rispetto ad una città che essa chiama alla pace, ma ancor più all’amore, trova il corrispettivo nei messaggi che più volte Francesca Romana cerca di fare arrivare a papa Eugenio IV, anche se rimangono inascoltati: “Advenga che più altre fiate in extasi la beata me disse da parte dello Signore che io andasi allo dicto Pontefice Papa Eugenio, che lo ammonissi de certe cose o vero li ricordassi. Onde andando Io ad fare l’ambasciata, et esso non apprezzando lo dicto fui ammonito che non ce andassi più, et che lo lassassi nello suo volere” (Armellini, *Vita* 86). Gli stessi *Tractati* che narrano la discesa agli inferi di Francesca Romana delineano una conoscenza non superficiale della città, delle tensioni e fratture che la squassavano, e sono animati da un desiderio di ristabilire un ordine morale della vita pubblica che nella descrizione delle atroci pene infernali cerca un agente disinnescante di quanto la mistica reputava deleterio per una armoniosa vita cittadina.

Nella comunità di donne di cui faceva parte e nel rapporto con la cognata Vannozza, con la compagna Rita, Francesca Romana trovò il fondamento per avere una voce autorevole rispetto a quanto stava accadendo nel mondo, come del resto era già accaduto a Caterina da Siena, che aveva avvocato a sé l’autorevolezza

necessaria per rivolgersi a papi e imperatori.<sup>23</sup> Dalla pratica religiosa quotidiana Francesca trasse alimento per le proprie visioni,<sup>24</sup> ma è dalla pratica comunitaria con le altre donne che Francesca Romana trasse l'autorevolezza per fare della propria esperienza interiore parola e dettato mistico, a farlo andare per il mondo, rispondendo pienamente a quanto le era stato detto in una visione: "Non gire cercando dolore" (Armellini, *Vita* 143), capovolgendo così il titolo di un bel saggio di Giovanni Pozzi sul *Patire e non potere nel discorso dei santi*, che nel discorso di Francesca Romana, in nome dell'amore per il mondo, diviene "potere e non patire".

Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza"

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<sup>23</sup> Vedi quanto scrive a questo proposito Zancan, *Lettere di Caterina da Siena*.

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Jane Tylus

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## Mystical Enunciations: Mary, the Devil, and Quattrocento Spirituality

Two images of Mary as annunciate stand out in the decades immediately following Trent. The one, a painting by Tintoretto of 1583, shows a dazzling array of angels literally exploding into Mary's spacious room, as the future mother of Christ looks up to heaven, arms outstretched, her head back (figure 1). Diminutive in contrast to the angelic hosts, Mary is, if not incidental, at least secondary to the burst of light infusing her from above. The second image, more mediated but no less central, is in the final canto of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. The Muslim sorceress Armida, on the threshold of suicide, is prevented from killing herself by her former lover, the Crusader Rinaldo, who seizes the sword she holds poised against her breast and promises to be her knight forever if she will refrain from death; even more glorious to him would be her conversion to Christianity. "Ecco l'ancilla tua," Armida utters, reciting Mary's words to the awaiting angel and overwhelmed, like Tintoretto's virgin, by the powerful presence that surrounds her.

As indices of female mystical experience in Counter-Reformation Italy, these moments may not seem particularly central. Indeed, they might appear utterly removed from the context of mystical spirituality at all. And yet both Tasso and Tintoretto take up a longstanding tradition associating Mary as mystic and change it in order to conform to a new *ethos* in late sixteenth-century Italy. The problematics they engender in so doing I will briefly address at the end of this essay. The tradition that they departed from, particularly as it was expressed in Quattrocento writing and art, is my primary focus: a tradition in which Mary is not the subject of ravishment by Gabriel or Rinaldo but very much a pensive subject within a well-defined architectural space. Far from being invaded by furious angels, that space is at once protected by and pronounced in its integrity.

The meaning of this integral space, dear to Quattrocento painters and writers, is determined by a number of factors in early Renaissance Italy which I will elaborate by way of one of the more compelling documents of Italian female mysticism, the *Sette armi spirituali* of Caterina Vegri, Saint Catherine of

Bologna.<sup>1</sup> A strong advocate of *clausura* for the order of Clarisse to which she belonged until her death in 1463, Caterina invokes Mary to articulate an ethics of mystical enclosure that at once is linked to and extends beyond the simple physical space of the *ceppo* or of the convent. (On the two known occasions when Caterina had to leave the convent she entered when only thirteen — once when her order entered a new building, again when she went to her native Bologna to serve as abbess against her wishes — she was physically unable to move and had to be carried out.) In elaborating on the seven “weapons” she learned to employ against a devil whose subtleties long held her captive, Caterina seeks to guarantee an integrity and level of autonomy not only for herself but for her sisters in an era in which the authenticity of female mystical experience was increasingly coming into question. Educated in the sophisticated court of Ferrara in the 1420’s, member of a group of tertiaries founded by a pious laywoman in 1426, and active as novice mistress and eventually as abbess when the group officially became Clarisse, the author of the *Sette armi spirituali* was an unusually articulate individual whose work is both a spiritual guide and an autobiography. In so straddling the genres of guidebook and personal testimony, freely quoting not only from Scripture but the vernacular works of Jacopone da Todi and St. Francis, her book also reveals the tensions of that peculiar and popular phenomenon known as Quattrocento spirituality, informed, in Caterina’s case, by a sophisticated upbringing at a northern Italian court.

Caterina seeks to resolve those tensions with the command that she and her sisters must spend their lives “combatendo virilmente” not only “la propria frazilitade” but the snares of Satan himself.<sup>2</sup> The world which Caterina shared with many novices over a period of thirty years is one in which consolation and mental peace are conspicuously and necessarily absent, due to the insidious presence of a demon who disguises himself as a messenger of light. And in the “virile” warfare in which the mystic is endlessly engaged, Mary the annunciate becomes a crucial and perhaps surprising warrior.

### I. *qualis est ista sallutatio?*

As the title of Caterina’s book promises, the *Sette armi spirituali* is written as a defense against the “astutie” of the devil, and the first six chapters of the book list the appropriate forms of combat against this wily adversary: diligence, humility, trust in God, the memory of Christ’s passion, the thought of one’s own death, and hope in “li beni del paradiso” (121). The seventh chapter,

<sup>1</sup> For background on Caterina Vegri, see Foletti’s introduction to her edition of the *Sette armi spirituali*, the article by Spanò, and McLaughlin’s article on Corpus Domini in Ferrara, the convent in which Caterina lived until she went to Bologna in 1456. A large section of the *Sette armi spirituali* is excerpted in *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* 261–86.

<sup>2</sup> *Sette armi spirituali*, ed. Foletti, p. 140. Subsequent references to Caterina Vegri’s work will be cited parenthetically in the text.



focusing on the final weapon crucial to Christian war — the authority of holy Scripture — notably departs from the short preceding chapters insofar as it consists largely of a lengthy and detailed account of Caterina's mystical struggles. It is in her preamble to this chapter on Scripture that Caterina refers, albeit briefly, to the annunciation:

. . . de questo ve prego, carissime sorele, che prudentemente le sapiati uxare e mai non ve trovati senza esse, acìd che melgio possati otenire triunfo de victoria contra li vostri aversarii. E guardati bene non siate inaganate soto spetia de bene, inperzò che lo diavolo alcune volte apare in spetia de Cristo o della verzene Maria o vero in qualche fegura d'anzolo o de santo. E perzò inn ogni aparitione che advenesse, prendite l'arma della scriptura, la quale manifesta commo la madre de Cristo, quando li aparve l'anzolo Cabriele, el modo che essa tene dicendo inverso lui: *qualis est ista sallutatio?* E questo modo tenete anche vue inn ogni apareitione e sentimento ocurente e cussì molto bene volerve certificarve s'el è bono o rio spirto innanci che ad esso se dia udientia; e beato chi cussì farà.

(123-24)

Caterina's Mary contrasts sharply with the serene women of countless annunciation scenes from the late middle ages and early Renaissance — women I will return to momentarily. Rather than gracefully greeting the descended angel or humbly turning away from him, this Mary inhabits a world not unlike that inhabited by Caterina herself, as soon becomes apparent in the course of the chapter. This is a world in which devils readily take on the appearance of angels, and Mary's question, as it is positioned in Caterina's text, acknowledges the constant dangers of deception and the absolute necessity of caution.

For this question — “what kind of greeting is this” — Caterina went to Luke's gospel, where it is phrased in terms of Mary's thoughtful musing: when she hears the angel's greeting, “*turbata est in sermone eius, et cogitabat qualis esset ista salutatio*” (Luke 1:29). Caterina is hardly the first to wonder at Mary's initial reaction to Gabriel. In the numerous handbooks catering to popular piety that appeared in the wake of the Franciscan movement of the late middle ages, many of which drew on the expansive and homely account of Mary's life in the apocryphal epistles of Jerome, Mary's momentary hesitation is explained and even explained away as symptomatic of her true humility and “honest and virtuous shame”, as the writer of the fifteenth-century *Meditationes* puts it (*Meditations* 17). Others such as Alessandro Borromeo, author of the *Vita della Vergine*, attribute it to confusion; Mary knew the angel, having conversed with him before; she simply was “pensando qual fosse questo saluto” since she had not yet known man, and therefore reveals that she is “prudentissima” (86-87). The popular Florentine preacher Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce suggests that “this disquiet [*conturbatio*], as Nicholas of Lyra writes, came not from incredulity but from wonder, since she was used to seeing angels and marvelled

not at the fact of the Angel's apparition so much as at the lofty and grand salutation" (Baxandall 51).

In the work of Borromeo, Caracciolo and others, Luke's brief encounter becomes vastly expanded, as an audience is clearly meant to identify with the young woman as she receives God's messenger. But central as the Franciscans were in making the Gospels a lived rather than a textual experience (Lesnick 139), the story of Mary as it is elaborated in both popular literature and painting nonetheless points to a critical tension regarding the extent of Mary's exemplarity.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, we have the austere queen of heaven becoming an impoverished young maiden;<sup>4</sup> on the other hand, Mary's daily conversations with beneficent angels aware of her future status as Christ's mother imply an essential inimitability and difference from all other women. Caterina's contribution to this narrative — a Mary whose *conturbatio* is raised to the level of ontological doubt — seeks to minimize Mary's exceptional nature by emphasizing her exemplary powers of discernment. It also perhaps articulates both Caterina's reading of, and one of the rationales for, one of the more pronounced features of Quattrocento Italian paintings of the annunciation.

This is Mary's solitary occupation of a chamber or an interior space that is emphatically divided from the room inhabited by God's descending angel.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The issue of Mary's exemplarity for medieval and early modern women has been a contested one in much current scholarship. Marina Warner and Susan Starr Sered insist on Mary's exceptional nature. Because she is the *only* woman who has been thus blessed, she is, to cite Sered, "an impossible model for Catholic women" (18). Penny Gold calls attention to the difficulties women would have had in knowing with whom to identify, Christ or Mary: "Was [a female viewer] to identify with the male child and think of herself as being mothered, or was she to identify with the Virgin, and think of herself as mothering others?" (148). For all of the work she has done on images of maternity in the middle ages, Caroline Bynum has turned little attention to Mary; she has, if anything, played down the importance of women's devotion to Mary while admitting that "much more work needs to be done" on precisely this issue (409n43). Kieckhefer has some valuable pages on Marian devotion in *Unquiet Souls* (165-73). Current theological work based largely on the work of Kristeva has insisted on the importance of an accessible "Maternity" as represented in Mary; see Astell's article on Marian coronation. As will become apparent in this essay, Caterina Vegri clearly wishes to identify with Mary not only as an exemplary spiritual mother, but also as a good hermeneutician; thus the drama of Mary's encounter with potential demons becomes a model for Caterina's encounter with real demons.

<sup>4</sup> In his seminal work on "The Madonna of Humility," Meiss charts the dethroning of the majestic Marys of Duecento and early Trecento paintings and the gradual emergence of Mary as a "real person — like the spectator" (459).

<sup>5</sup> "More than in any of the other themes of the Christmas picture cycle, the interior space of the image of the Annunciation becomes important in the space of earthly existence" (Schiller 46). For a discussion of the essential differences between Flemish and Italian paintings of the annunciation see Robb. Denny's book is a fascinating account of the narrative changes in annunciation scenes over several hundred years; his conclusion that in the Italian tradition Gabriel is generally more submissive and Mary more autonomous fits with my own readings of the annunciations I have

Unlike many contemporary French or Flemish annunciations, where Gabriel and Mary occupy a unified space which is often the interior of a church, paintings of Giotto, Fra Angelico, Botticelli, Domenico Veneziano and others depict a "double arrangement" in which Gabriel and Mary are separated by an anteroom, a pillar, an arcade, or, in the painting of Jacopo del Casentino, an imposing lectern from which Mary is reading (figures 2, 3). The apparent resistance to fusing the space of the annunciating angel and the awaiting madonna is, in part, a function of technique. Many of the Italian painters depict Gabriel standing in a garden, thereby combining exterior with interior spaces and revealing their proficiency at the new art of perspective. Yet the deliberate separation of angel and virgin, the deployment of columns and pillars that seem in some paintings, as Mary McCarthy has wryly commented, to "hold the picture up" (109), no doubt serves a more far-reaching function that extends beyond a claim to technical proficiency. On a purely symbolic level, Mary's enclosed chamber signifies the *hortus conclusus* from Canticles, in which the bride awaits the coming of her spouse; Mary was often referred to as Christ's bride in late medieval Europe. It may also reflect a general desire for the social claustration of young, unwed girls; Danielle Régnier-Bohler cites the anonymous advice to young women that they should "remain as secluded as possible in [their] room, for it was in her room that the glorious Virgin was hailed and there that she conceived the son of God." (Duby 358) But even as Mary's enclosure serves as a metaphor for virginity, it can also be seen as an extension of the very condition Caterina sees Mary as possessing. Removed from physical contact with the angel, but not, apparently, unable to see him — a feat difficult in a number of paintings where a wall obstructs one participant from the other — the Mary of so many Renaissance Italian paintings is placed in the posture of Caterina herself when confronted by an angel. She is, in short, a mystic.<sup>6</sup>

But a mystic, at least for Caterina, who doubts the veracity of appearances, and who therefore seeks guidance in the form of a question; and one, too, for whom mystical experience comes not in the form of ravishment but necessitates an act of careful discernment. Caterina is not the only Renaissance writer to make of Mary a doubting mystic. Earlier in the fifteenth century, the French jurist, Jean Gerson, the prolific author of such treatises as *De distinctione revelationum* and *De probatione spirituum*, had likewise interrogated Mary's

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studied.

<sup>6</sup> For other examples of women who saw in the Annunciation a mystical experience and attempted to imitate it, see Christine Markyate, who, when locked in a coffin-like box to protect herself from sexual assault, had "the fairest of the children of men c[o]me to her through the locked door, bearing in His right hand a cross of gold" — a visitation that happens not inconsequentially on the Feast of the Annunciation itself and thereby links the enclosed Christina to Mary (Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* 149). Jean Marie de Maille also experienced her own "annunciation" (Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls* 169).



encounter with Gabriel in order to arrive at the conclusion that Mary exemplifies the five *virtutes* necessary for the presence of divine revelation (Gerson 39-40). Gerson in fact praises Mary as one of a rare few possessed of the *petit artem discernendi* (37) — precisely the skill he proposes to teach in his treatise. In offering to us a suspicious Mary, Caterina likewise provides her reader with a female mystic whose enclosure, accentuated in so many contemporary paintings, is paradigmatic of more than bodily integrity. Mary's question, that is, manifests an intellectual act of reflection and discrimination that will eventually come to mark Caterina's response to her own visions as well. "E compiuta la predicta vixione," she will remark later in her treatise, "tornando in si medesima custie e rumigando le cosse che vezute avea, comenzò a pensare che significava questo che li era stato mostrado" (157). Following these reflections, she immediately seeks to authenticate her vision — "E volendose de ciò certificare" — suggesting that Caterina has employed the "weapon" of Scripture by following Mary's cautious example.

That Caterina makes Mary exemplary of caution and doubt; that Caterina will learn, after great trials, that all angels and apparitions are not authentic, says something significant about the era in which she was writing and one to which I will momentarily turn. Caterina's characterization of Mary as mystic also speaks to her conceptualization of the mystical space as both a locus of production — it was here where Mary, assured that the angel she witnessed was indeed sent from heaven, conceived the son of God — and in need of protection, given its inherent vulnerability. To this extent, Mary's radical solitude as depicted both in Quattrocento painting and in Caterina's text — to cite Jean Guitton, "Dans sa cloture, Marie est figurée seule. Pas de parent, pas d'époux" (32) — is testimony to the vulnerability of the individual when faced with apparitions from another world without the assistance of "parent or spouse". But as Guitton also notes, the annunciation scenes of early Renaissance Italy likewise "figurent l'acte de la liberté" (31) and thereby attest to the considerable freedom that Mary can be said to possess in affirming or denying the "vixione" before her. One is reminded of Bernard of Clairvaux's homily on the annunciation as an example of a late medieval belief in the importance of Mary's ability to *choose* her status as handmaiden: "The angel awaits your response. . . And we await, O Lady, your word of compassion. . . if you consent we shall be freed immediately" (Denny 148-49). To see the lonely space of the *clausura* as symbolic of Mary's autonomy in the face of the impending message from God is to read it less in terms of its vulnerabilities or its restrictions, as many historians of the role of *clausura* in the convent have done,<sup>7</sup> and to interpret it instead as a liberating, if

<sup>7</sup> Schulenburg and others have focussed on the controlling aspects of enclosure when it was first instituted in the twelfth century: "the basic rationale for narrow enclosure seems to have been the desire of *controlling* women's sexuality through enforced isolation, not guarding her autonomy" (78-79). Yet it seems important to take into consideration the powerfully *liberating* effects that

dangerous, place of freedom.

Caterina accentuates both the welcome autonomy that is the function of *clausura* and the difficulties that are likely to arise in a convent in which superiors are not wary of its dangers. Not only is it an "ottima cossa [da] perseverare ne o loco che Dio ce chiama" (141) but the cell is an ideal, indeed, the only place where one can conquer one's battles against temptation. Caterina teaches her novitiates desirous of fleeing to ask their spiritual mothers to "me metati in ceppo o in presone perfino me sia cessato questa bataglia, acò che io possa perseverare in quello locho nel quale Dio me à chiamatta" (135). But it is likewise critical that spiritual mothers understand the intense spiritual and psychological experiences that are likely to greet the young woman placed "in ceppo o in presone," experiences that require precisely the question that Mary, Caterina's exemplary mother, had already asked. It is a question that is a testimony both to the radical "liberté" which Caterina sees both the mother of Christ and her enclosed novice as possessing, and to problematic developments within Caterina's convent and in Quattrocento spirituality in general.

## II. nos nescimus unde sit

Caterina cites the above passage from the Gospel of John in connection with Christ's willing descent from glory into poverty. Such obfuscation of Christ's divine origins, a constant theme throughout John, provokes the pharisees to claim to the blind man Christ has cured, "nos nescimus unde sit": we don't know where he has come from. The implication in John and in Caterina is that those who are not Pharisees do in fact know Christ's origins, and indeed wish to imitate his act of mortification. Thus Caterina comments in her tenth chapter that the more she is vilified, the happier she is, "cognosendo che per simile cosse più me seria conformatta a Cristo, dolce mio Signore, cha per niuno altro modo" (159).

And yet it is precisely the principle of similitude which Caterina articulates towards the end of the *Sette armi* that accounts for the intensity of the spiritual struggles, often threatening to lead her to despair, which constitute the central narrative of her text. "Nos nesimus unde sit" is said of Christ in the Gospels, and yet in the *Sette armi spirituali* and in the mystical tradition in which Caterina is writing, the same phrase might be applied not to Christ per se, but to the apparitions of Christ, the Virgin, and "qualche fegura d'anzolo o de santo" (123). For at the origins of the hermetic tradition with which Caterina was clearly familiar is the acknowledgment that demonic appearances are deceptive and essentially unknowable without God's aid. Hence Jerome, writing of Antony: "Nescit enim Dominus vias impiorum. In totum autem, orare oportet nos ut accipiamus gratiam discretionis spirituum, ut, sicut scriptum est, ut non

omni spiritui credamus"<sup>8</sup> (Not even God knows the ways of the evil ones. In sum, it is needful to pray to God for the gift of distinguishing spirits, so that we do not believe them all, as it is written). And Paul's more famous, more haunting, dictum from Corinthians, observes the fundamental diabolical strategy lurking at the heart of Christendom: "even Satan disguises himself (*transfiguratur se*) as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). Or as one recent historian of demonic literature has put it, "because demons acted in the same human and natural universe as God, it followed that they obeyed the same psychological and physical laws" (MacCormack 107). In short, the devil as conceived by early Christianity followed principles of similitude, not otherness.

The invocation of sameness, however, is uncharacteristic of demonic activity in the Middle Ages, in which the devil tended to be eminently recognizable as the bestial and ungodly power which he was. Even most of the desert fathers written of in the *Vitae Patrum* speak of their confrontation with Lucifer in terms of an epistemology of recognition. When Satan appears to John of Lycopolis as a priest, John instantly realizes who it is, addressing him as the "father of all subtlety and all mischief" (Russell 93); one hermit from the Life of Macarius recognizes that a baggage camel laden with food is simply a "phantasm" sent by Satan and instantly begins to pray (Russell 108). The lives of later mystics such as Umiltà of Faenza and Catherine of Siena are marked by often physical struggles with a being whose demonic origins are instantly knowable.<sup>9</sup> In one of the relatively few appearances of demons in Jacobus de Voragine's famous *Legenda aurea*, a text from which Caterina cites, Satan slips into the cloisters of St. Dominic's church, only to be recognized immediately by the saint himself when he lifts his hood and looks into his face.

In fact, in Voragine's popular work, of which hundreds of manuscript copies survive, there is only one example of what would seem to be the genuine undecidability of demonic appearance linked by Caterina Vegri to the Madonna's annunciation. This is Santa Juliana's brief entanglement with a diabolical presence, in which the devil appears to her in the guise of an angel and insists that she offer sacrifices to the gods. Juliana "burst into tears, and cried: 'My Lord Jesus, save me from the peril of my soul, and make known to me who it is that gives me such counsel!' And a voice from on high told her to lay hold of the visitor, and to force him to confess who he was" (Voragine 166). Juliana's initial impotence is translated instantly into impressive action as she binds the devil's arms behind his back, drags him through the market-place to make of him a laughing-stock, and ends his temporary sojourn in her prison cell by

<sup>8</sup> *Vita Antonii* 82 (38.5). A significant portion of the *Vita* is dedicated to teaching disciples the "signs" through which demons might be recognized, although the writer cautions that one can never fully grasp the *modus operandi* of the evil ones who are "always ready to disguise themselves" ("ad transfigurandum se parant"; 25.1).

<sup>9</sup> See the chapter entitled "She Seems to Have Come from the Desert," in Petroff's *Body and Soul*.



throwing him into a nearby privy. The episode in the privy aside, Juliana's uncertainty as charted by Voragine is an exceptional passage in a text in which devils are by and large knowable by human powers. While it can hardly be said to usher in a new era of relations with the devil, it can be argued that it will become prescient of late medieval and early Renaissance piety, particularly of women, who will increasingly burst out in tears in the hope that an authoritative voice will reveal demonic ontologies.<sup>10</sup>

Yet Caterina's crisis can be said to have consisted in her inability to have learned from Juliana's story. Immediately following the allusion to Mary's annunciation in chapter 7, Caterina proceeds to outline with considerable care the events that happen to "la sopradicta reliezioxa . . . la qualle in sua zovenetta etade, inluminata dalla divina gratia, vene al servitio de Dio in questo monasterio". In that monastery, the "sopradicta reliezioxa" who is clearly Caterina herself is soon visited by the devil: a devil who, in his first appearance, "li aparve in figura della verzene Maria," (124) and instructs her "'Se tu parti da ti l'amore vicioxo, io te daro lo virtuoxo'. E ditto questo dissparve." The astute Mary praised as discerning between devils and angels has here become the very mechanism for Caterina's own temptations. But unlike Juliana or Luke's Mary, Caterina does not question. For several years, in fact, until God reveals to her in the midst of her despair that her otherworldly visitors had been demonic, she believes that Mary had indeed come to her and instructed her to rid herself of an "amore vicioxo" whose nature Caterina could not readily discern. Moreover, the devil will come to an undiscerning Caterina again several more times, as Christ speaks to her from where he hangs on the cross in the convent chapel (125), and as Mary "con lo suo Fiolo in braze" (127) threatens to withhold her son from Caterina unless she leaves behind "l'amore vicioxo". Each time, Caterina fails to distinguish between the true Mary and the false one: "Per la qual cossa credendo pure lei che fusse stata la madre de Cristo." She also fails to discern the nature of her "amore vicioxo." Believing it to be purely sensual in origin, she only gradually discovers that the dangerous love of which "Christ" and "Mary" speak is a love of her own opinions as to how the convent should be run. Caterina's true "vice," that is, is gradually revealed by her demonic interlocutors to be her temptations to disobey her abbess, and to think, "con grande importunade, subito como la sua abatesa ordinava alcuno exercicio o dicto alcuna cossa, ge ne veniva quaxi innumerabili iudicii pensando: `melgio staria questa cossa per lo talle e tale modo,'e multi pensieri d'infidelità e de contradetione" (126).

In the informative introduction to her edition of the *Sette armi*, Cecilia Foletti has argued that Caterina's demonic imaginings that come to her in the

<sup>10</sup> On the introduction of new "opacities" into mystic speech in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries -- "There was no longer any common a priori -- neither on a sole universal Speaker nor on the link between word and thing; nor, therefore, on the principle of universal rules governing the verification or invalidation of statements" (Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* 164ff.).

privacy of her cell and in the chapel while she is praying, subtly turn Caterina's most prized virtue, that of obedience, against her. Foletti cogently argues that this is principally because the woman who headed the convent while Caterina was still a novitiate, Lucia Mascheroni, was ultimately forced to leave when the house once open to members of the laity and therefore only loosely bound to religious rule was brought within the rules of the Clarisse by papal bull.<sup>11</sup> Initially loyal to Mascheroni, Caterina retrospectively reassessed her relationship with her mistress and teacher when she wrote her first draft of the *Sette armi* in 1438. She nonetheless praises her in one of the few passages of the text where she refers to herself in the first person: Mascheroni had been the first woman "che me mostrò lo modo de servire a Dio con pura carità e materno affecto; a li piè della quale senpre me chiamo obligatissima e ricomandola cordialmente senpre a tute vue, madre e sorele." (156-7). And yet as Foletti comments, "Il fatto che la Mascheroni l'avesse incamminata nella via della religione non doveva essere dunque considerato come un valore da difendere ad ogni costo, ma doveva essere reinterpretato alla luce della volontà di Dio che si andava manifestando chiaramente nella storia del monastero del Corpus Domini" (75).

That the original head of Corpus Domini had refused to institute the rule of strict *clausura*, in keeping with the wishes of the woman who had provided for the convent in her will, suggests why it was necessary for Caterina to disobey Mascheroni's wishes. Caterina's own vision for Corpus Domini necessarily included the practice of enclosure which, as we have seen, Mary embodies in her solitude and which ultimately becomes for Caterina the only means to "venire a grande cognosimento de si medesma" (129). But what is striking is the need for a demonic language to effect this break — a break with a posture in which Caterina is faithful, unquestioning, and unreflective, and a posture which Caterina must relinquish so that as God informs her, she can acquire true "cognosimento." The fact that it is the *devil* who forces her to see her "infidelity" to her conscientious if misguided superiors as an "amore vicioxo," or as the fictive Christ tells her, a "theft" ("Ladra, tu me ai robato. Dame quello che me ai tolto" [125]), is problematic in light of the importance given to obedience within the convent.<sup>12</sup> In point of fact, as she discovers only belatedly, Caterina's promptings to question her abbess "con grande importunade" are *sanctioned* — and not by the devil, but by God, leading one recent critic to muse on the extent to which Caterina anticipates a later, Lutheran era in which individual conscience is privileged over loyalty to one's superiors (Leonardi).

It is important, however, to see in Caterina's ultimate victory over Lucia

<sup>11</sup> Also see McLaughlin's account of these developments.

<sup>12</sup> See the remarks of Patricia Ranft regarding the importance of obedience vis-a-vis one's spiritual director in monastic communities: "These two requirements, revelation of an individual's innermost thoughts and the complete surrender of one's will to a single spiritual director, pervade all early monastic direction" (10).

Mascheroni's vision for Corpus Domini not a gesture in the direction of the Reformation, but a vindication of the principles of *clausura* as a guarantor and representation of the scrutinizing of potentially false imitation, whether that be the imitation of misguided superiors or the demonic imitation of Christ. In gradually formulating a question that would change her way of life within the convent — *qualis est ista sallutatio?* — Caterina documents a crisis in fifteenth-century Catholicism that would only become exacerbated in the course of the Renaissance. In the autobiographical trajectory of the *Sette armi spirituali*, the inability to know the other clashes head on with the credibility of the image itself. In a century marked by speaking crucifixes, bleeding hosts, and a surge of iconophilia which Erasmus and the Reformers would challenge, Caterina's readiness to believe in the Mary and crucified Christ who speak to her in her chapel should not surprise. What does surprise Caterina herself — and what constitutes the lengthy crisis of her life that leads her to profound melancholy — is that these images are not real: that Christ crucified and Mary holding her child have been taken over and subverted by diabolical presences. This successful miming by the devil of Christianity's most sacred icons speaks to a more endemic crisis initiated by the practices of Quattrocento spirituality. In a climate incessantly drawn to the physical apprehension of Christ and what historians have called the "externalization of piety," the emphasis placed on the cults of saints and relics and the theological idea of transubstantiation led to what might be called a reproductivity of the sacred that threatened to strain the boundaries of credibility.<sup>13</sup> Popular cults such as that of Mary's ubiquitous breastmilk, particularly once they were subjected to the scepticism of critics such as Erasmus (who has his innocent believer, Ogygius, remark, "It could be called unusual, perhaps, but 'amazing' — no, since the Lord, who multiplies these things as he wills, is omnipotent"<sup>14</sup>), were invoked by the Reformers as a means of undermining a Catholicism based on the doctrine of transformative mimesis as experienced through the sacraments.

Indeed, the peculiar nature of Caterina's temptations speaks precisely to this potential for a breakdown in the period's faith in *imitatio* as a fundamental principle of religious practice. The ontological instability which Caterina unknowingly experiences until she is enlightened by God can be seen as an instability generated by a culture that looked for — and found — Christ's presence everywhere. Caterina's devil fully exploits this climate of "reproduction" by masquerading as Mary and the crucified Christ. But he also attacks the belief in transformative mimetics more directly when on one occasion he makes Caterina suspicious of the "miracle" of transubstantiation itself. Following her initial struggles when the devil appears to her as Mary and Christ, Caterina experiences a more subtle temptation: "per più tenpo avè grandissima

<sup>13</sup> See the excellent introductory chapter in Eire, *War Against the Idols*.

<sup>14</sup> "A Pilgrimage for the Sake of Religion" (1526), quoted in Eire, *War Against the Idols* 42.



temptatione d'infideltà cerca el sacramento de Cristo, cioè dubitava de l'ostia consacrata" (148). This "infidelity" continues for so long that she becomes virtually unable to take communion, until finally God "vixitò la mente sua e parlando intellectualmente con lei gli diette aperto cognosimento como veramente in quella hostia, la quale consacra el sacerdote, li è tuta la divinità e humanitate de esso Dio nostro" (148). But the boldest attack on orthodox belief is the simple refusal of the demonic Mary to let Caterina embrace her son. This refusal for Caterina to partake in the holy family — and more specifically, in the body of Christ which the demonic Mary jealously withholds from the poor novitiate — is in effect a refusal to allow her to partake in the sacrament and the act of nourishment which Mary most fully represents. "Mary"'s rejection of Caterina because of her *infideltà* to her own spiritual *madre* is additionally significant insofar as Caterina is denied the experience of maternity herself and forced to imitate an inadequate mother.

It is fitting, then, that after Caterina recognizes through God's benign intervention the delusions to which she has been subject, she is given the very infant that had earlier been withheld from her, and on the eve of Christ's nativity at that. While indeed it is "Dio" who intervenes in Caterina's demonic visions, all mediated by Mary and her son, the *true* Mary nonetheless returns shortly after God's revelation, performing a gesture that is neither alien to mystical literature nor insignificant as a specific moment in Caterina's spiritual and personal journey.<sup>15</sup> Signalling this particular moment as "una più maravegliosa e mazore gratia concessa a questa medesima dalla divine clementia" (145), Caterina relates that on Christmas Eve she received permission from the "madre abatessa" who had succeeded Lucia Mascheroni to remain in the chapel all night long, where she began "de dire mile volte l'*Ave Maria* . . . a reverentia della madre de

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<sup>15</sup> Several other medieval and early modern mystics claimed to have experienced the joy of holding the infant Christ in their arms. Marie d'Oignies believes that "for three or more days she held Him close to her so that He nestled between her breasts like a baby" (Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* 9), and Umiliana Cerchi and Umiltà da Faenza both experience the intensity of being able to hold and to caress the new-born Christ. In an extraordinary passage, Francesca Romana notes how she too sees Christ and Mary on Christmas Eve, and she takes care to cover Christ lest he get cold. But her gazing at Christ is soon superseded by her viewing of Mary, and a veritable *blazon* of Mary's maternal and queenly body follows. When she returns to look at Christ again, he is gone; and Francesca is left to cry, "per lo guardare a te Madonna mi ho perduto lo mio Signore" (*Scrittrici mistiche italiane* 258). In an earlier vision, Francesca is given Christ by Mary and she prays that Mary not take him away: "Lo dolce amore che me se è dato, madonna, puoi che me l'hai prestato, non me lo tollere questa fiata puoi che l'agio desiderato" (255). Francesca was not alone in her desire to keep Christ to herself and thus assume Mary's maternal role; Agnes of Montepulciano likewise refused to return to the Virgin the baby that had been entrusted to her for an hour (Duby 626). One is tempted to see in these incidents a conflictual relationship between the female mystic and maternal practices, if not between the mystic and Mary herself.

Cristo." At the fourth hour of night, "nella quale ora credo che naque el Salvatore, subito innanci a essa li aparve la Verzene glorioxa con lo suo dillectissimo Figliolo in brace." When Mary gives her Christ to hold — "apropinquandose a questa sore, cortexemente e con grande benignidade ge lo poxe in brace" — she notes that "tanto era suavissimo l'odore che uxiva della purissima carne." Such physical tangibility, denied her before by a demon who taunted her with the impossibility of the incarnation, enables her to realize that "questa vixione non foe inn insunio, né immazinario, né anche per eccesso mentale, anzi aperta e manifesta senza alcuna fantaxia" (145). In this vision, the final one of the lengthy seventh chapter, motherhood is transferred from the "madre de Cristo" to a Caterina who was earlier denied the experience of maternity. Whereas earlier, the false Mary had withheld her son from Caterina, the true Mary now gladly offers him up so that Caterina may participate in her own "nativity" — a nativity for which she quickly became known throughout Ferrara and which anticipated her arrival in Bologna, where she was greeted as a "second Santa Chiara" (Ragg 108).

As the vision of Christmas makes clear, Caterina's devils tempted her to remain within the enclosed family bound by the very virtue of "ubedienza" which she prized so highly, compelled to adhere to a level of *imitatio* which was restrictive rather than transformative. The devil had prevented Caterina from becoming a "madre" herself, and a mother, as she continuously asserts, who ideally subjects herself to her children even as she provides them with the sustenance and nourishment that Caterina covertly suggests she had lacked: a good mother must constantly be "vizelante sopra la grega a ssi commesa, sapiando commo lo diavolo, lopo infernale, sempre cerca de divorala" (131). When Caterina was suffering under the illusion that those who forced upon her an unnatural "ubedienza" were truly Mary and Jesus, she was not alerted to the importance of the weapons in which Caterina takes it upon herself to instruct others. Only after considerable trials was Caterina able to become a true Mary: circumspect, "prudentissima," but also alert as to the suspect nature of a universe in which the devil can masquerade as the truest mother of all and threaten rejection of an unfaithful child.

In documenting the gradual articulation of Mary's question, Caterina's autobiography comes to embrace what Paul Ricouer has called a hermeneutics of suspicion which would eventually overtake early modern Europe and which Caterina saw as essential to institute within the convent where she was responsible for "fledgling souls": "Adoncha necesario è fare dilizente guardia e non aspetare a sovegnire la pecorela quando è nella bocha de o lopo e posta inn estremo, ma subito con vera benignidade e largità suvenire le infirmitade de l'anima e del corpo" (131). Such vigilance protects the fragile knowledge that God gives Caterina of the manner in which "era possibile che el Fiolo de Dio, Cristo Iesù, foxe incarnato de Spirto santo e nato de la verzene Maria" (148), and which alone provides Caterina with the assurance not only of Christ's

transformation into flesh but her own transformation into him: "la prima volta che essa se comunicò [after her consoling visitation from God], abendo ricevuta l'ostia sacrata in boca, sentì e gustò la suavitade della purissima carne de l'angelo immacolato Cristo Iesù. E quello sentimento e gusto foe de tanto dolcissimo e suavissimo sapore e dolceza, che non se poria narare né darne alcuna figura per modo che intendere se potesse" (149). By resisting a theory of incarnation, by refusing Caterina's participation in the mystical, divine family, by forcing her to be simply a "copy" of the superiors who were themselves in error, Caterina's demons embody the threat of mere imitation as opposed to a more transformative mimesis. Yet it was precisely Caterina's growing skepticism regarding the practice of *imitatio* within the convent that enabled her to transform herself into the woman who was eventually forced to lead a new group of Clarisse and to compose a personal document startling in its originality and perceptiveness.

### III. scriptum est

According to Caterina's biographer, Suor Illiminata Bembo, on her deathbed the mystic pulled from beneath her mattress a copy of the *Sette armi spirituali* and gave it to her confessor with the request that it be given to her sisters in the Clarisse's convents in Ferrara and Bologna to read. Attached to the manuscript was an "epistola ispirata da Dio" requesting that "questo liberzolo" be suitably corrected and copied and given "al colegio de le mie madre e cordiale sorelle del Corpo de Cristo in Ferrara" while "lo sopradeto librizol permanga poi in quel locho cioè monesterio dove finirà el mio peregrinagio" (162). Freed from its own enclosure, the text was copied and released after Caterina's death in 1463. Her modern editor suggests that manuscript copies of the *Sette armi* in the fifteenth century and its publication in 1475 indicate "come l'opera della Vegri, superate le mura del convento, rispondesse alla richiesta di una più vasta cerchia di persone" (3-4).

When tempted by Satan in the desert, Christ responded several times with the dictum, *scriptum est*, and Caterina records his response at the beginning of her long, autobiographical seventh chapter: "La setima arma con la quale possiamo vincere li nostri nemici si è la memoria della santa scriptura, la quale dovemo portare nel core nostro. . . . E con questa arma el nostro salvatore Cristo Iesù vinse e confuxe lo diavolo nel diserto dicendo: *scriptum est*" (123). Instructing her sisters that they should consider the writings of the apostles as "novelle letere mandate a vue dal vostro celestiale spoxo" (123), Caterina uses a homely but sensitive metaphor in order to alert her readers to the personal aspect of the scripture which they heard "ogni dì" and which as an educated woman Caterina could read. But the metaphor also may be seen as inclusive of Caterina's own "scripture" insofar as her work is *itself* conceived as a long letter to her sisters, written "de mia propria mano solo per timore de la divina reprehensione se io tacesse quello che ad altri porria zoare" (115). Just as scripture



is Christ's defense against Satan in the enclosed space of the desert where Christ is alone, so may Caterina's book be said to become her sisters' defense in the enclosed spaces of their convents as Caterina instructs them in the act of what she elsewhere calls "certificare": requesting from God, as did Santa Juliana, the knowledge of whether or not her visions are true. Following a vision of the Last Judgment in which Caterina sees herself among the saved and standing near an admiring and silent Mary, she writes, "comenzò a pensare che significava questo che li era stato mostrado. E volendose de ciò certificare, fiece oracione, pregando l'altissimo Dio se dignasse manifestarli se questo li era mostrato perché tosto dovese esser lo finale iuditio, o vero se fosse pure stato ilusione diabolica. Unde, *qui legis intelligat*, che veramente foe certificata commo quello era stato sentimento e vixione divina" . . . (157).

As the number of Santa Julianas anxious to "certificare" their visions increased, the Inquisition took over the "voice" of the unseen figure who would determine whether or not a woman had witnessed a devil or an angel. Jean Gerson, noted earlier in regard to his perceptive treatment of Mary as exemplary mystic, was called in to determine whether celebrated mystics such as Bridget of Sweden and Joan of Arc had been "visited" by angels or by illusions (he decided that Joan of Arc had been truly inspired and Bridget had merely seen diabolical apparitions).<sup>16</sup> Many other examples of outside intervention into the lives of mystics would emerge in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; an upsurge in prosecutions of heretics and witches accompanied the "reforms" ushered in after the Council of Constance in 1418 (Kieckhefer, *Magic* 199-200). In general, one can speak of a decline in the readiness to believe in mystics' authenticity as the Renaissance continues. Ottavia Niccoli, William Christian and others have documented the growing suspicion with which mystical pronouncements were greeted in southern Europe, and Trent simply confirmed the necessity of official intervention in mystical experience.

Writing at the beginning of what was to be a lengthy and only gradual decline of mystics' centrality in early modern Europe, Caterina probably cannot be seen as particularly prescient regarding her *own* distrust of her visions. Yet at a moment exactly contemporary with Joan of Arc and the rise of the Inquisition, Caterina internalized not only an era's growing doubts regarding mystical authenticity, but the means of verifying her visions. Her response is thus notable insofar as it eliminates the need for any external intervention. Intervention was instead limited to the caring but ever-wary abbesses and novice mistresses who through Caterina's book would learn to recognize the dangers to which they and their charges are constantly subject. In addressing her work to future spiritual mothers, Caterina tries to ensure that others would not suffer as she had, in an environment devoid of understanding and one in which she was

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<sup>16</sup> On Gerson, see Christian, *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain*, chap. 4; and Gerson's *De distinctione revelationum*.

forced to challenge the ministrations of her superiors.

We may in fact see in Caterina's subtle supplementation of Scripture with her own "scriptural" autobiography a move that will become more frequent in the century to come, particularly as women were denied access to a priestly controlled Bible. For example, particularly in her final work, *Las moradas*, Teresa de Avila implicitly replaces the biblical canon which women were prohibited from reading with her own guide to exploring and vindicating her mystical experiences. Threatened by priests who questioned the veracity of her visions, as well as by the *alumbrados* who falsely claimed to be illuminated by God, Teresa composed a text that taught her sisters how to defend the integrity of their mystical experiences. As I have commented elsewhere, *Las moradas* enables an act of self-confirmation over and against suspicious priests and an ignorant public.<sup>17</sup> Caterina's enemy, as we have seen, is largely internalized, the familiar demon from the *Vitae Patrum* who threatens to undermine her spiritual and intellectual integrity. Yet both women challenged the extent to which blind obedience to authority is meant to be seen as a positive virtue, and both are vitally concerned with women's capacity to understand and to define their mental and emotional integrity. Both moreover wrote to their *sorelle* not in order to lead them to the threshold of mystical experience but to allow them to confirm — to "certificare" — the mystical experiences they had already had without the need for external verification.

In light of Teresa's writings, the importance of Mary becomes even more central in regard to female mysticism of the early Renaissance. Mary too, of course, is holding a book in countless annunciation scenes — generally open to the passages in the Old Testament prophesying the birth of Christ, but a book that in Caterina's eyes is obviously seen not as a document of prophecy but as one of defense, as her seventh chapter bears witness. Thus "armed," Mary depicts the mystic whose physical space is not invaded by the potentially demonic angel, conserving within her own *clausura* a rigorous resistance to contamination and aware of the dangers of diabolical imitation. But the enclosure that Mary inhabits is not finally limited to the individual cell of either Caterina or Teresa, but functions as a metaphor for the *clausura* of the convent as a whole. In serving as a model of maternity that extends from caring for God's son to caring for the *consorelle* of the convent — a model that the founder of Caterina's order, Chiara of Assisi, articulates when she exhorts her sisters to love each other in the same way Mary had loved her son<sup>18</sup> — she can be said to embody for

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<sup>17</sup> See my chapter, "Between Two Fathers: Teresa of Avila and Mystical Autobiography," in *Writing and Vulnerability in the Late Renaissance* 54-79.

<sup>18</sup> "If a mother love and nourish her child according to the flesh, how much more lovingly must not a Sister love and nourish her sister according to the Spirit" (quoted in Petroff, *Body and Soul* 74). Petroff emphasizes that "Clare wanted a community that was as close to nonhierarchical as possible; her models for workable female relationships were sister-sister, maidservant-mistress,

Caterina and Teresa alike the conscientious and exemplary head of a community that protects and nurtures its own.

Like many female mystics, however, including Teresa herself as she is (mis)represented by Bernini's famous statue in the Cornaro chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Mary would become deprived of both her powers of intellectual discernment and her private, protected enclosure with its symbolic dimensions of chastity and spiritual integrity and the *clausura* of convent communities. Too, in the movement that was to continue in later centuries and that culminated with the proclamation of Mary's immaculate conception, the Church celebrated her exalted status while underplaying the human and therefore exemplary drama from which Caterina had drawn her own lesson. To return to the two scenes of annunciation with which I began, Tintoretto's explosive scene denies Mary any semblance of self-possession, as the column that had once separated her from God's descending angel is utterly bypassed in the wake of the celestial host, and the open book falls, discarded, to her lower lap. Tasso's Mary-like Armida not only presents us with another instance of a violation of physical and — if we read Caterina Vegri rightly — intellectual integrity, but also with a characteristically Tassian ambiguity regarding the authenticity of spiritual experience. As any reader of the *Gerusalemme* knows, Armida's conversion is — and was — a profoundly controversial moment in the poem. Her return in the final canto after the Christians have virtually won the battle is disquieting; even more so are the words she utters as she submits, for the first and last time, to her new Christian master: "Ecco l'ancilla tua." In uttering Mary's words to the awaiting "angel," thereby making Rinaldo into no less a character than Gabriel, Armida incorporates herself and the demonic world she has represented throughout the poem into the world of her conqueror. Or at least she seems to incorporate herself. The reception of Tasso's poem was extraordinarily mixed, but on one point both Tasso's critics and advocates agreed: Armida's last-minute conversion was unmotivated and, as a result, suspect. Does she really convert or does she, the consummate sorceress whose legacy includes Circe, Medea, Alcina, and the disguised devils of many a saint's life, *parody* conversion, miming Christianity through her pagan craft in order to show the dangerous ease with which Christianity can be replicated? *Can* there be a true *imitatio Mariae*, or are the very mimetic productions in which Catholic Europe had invested so much of its faith always and inherently liabilities?<sup>19</sup>

The close of Tasso's poem suggests that the problems opened up in the burst of re-productivity that characterized late medieval and early Renaissance Europe had not been easily resolved by either the Reformers or the Counter-

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and daughter-mother, all relationships characterized by emotional closeness, mutual responsibility, and common needs" (69).

<sup>19</sup> The preceding paragraph was drawn from my article, "Reasoning Away Colonialism: Tasso and the Production of the *Gerusalemme liberata*."



Reformers, and his potentially deceptive Armida merely exacerbates the issues of mystical authenticity that Caterina herself had experienced on a personal level. But unlike Tasso, Caterina seems to have resolved, at least for herself and — she would hope — for her sisters, the crisis of mystical authenticity that she had known in the convents of Ferrara and Bologna. A small annunciation scene in Bologna, thought to be by Caterina herself, whose illustrated devotional books survive in Bologna's archives and whose artistic talents were noted by Suor Illuminata,<sup>20</sup> may serve as a fitting conclusion (figure 4). The central portion of the painting depicts Christ with his head crowned and one hand outstretched, while the other grasps an open book on which Caterina has written, "In me omnis gratia. . . ." In the upper left- and right-hand corners is the annunciation: on the left, the gesturing figure of the angel; on the right, seated in front of a meadow shaded by golden trees, is Mary as annunciate. Sealed within a *tondo* that is just above Christ's shoulder, the Mary whose features are only dimly discernible is clearly subservient to the looming figure of her son; but she is also enclosed in a separate space, marked off from both the advancing angel and from Christ. Perhaps in Caterina's depiction of the annunciation we have a telling image of her recognition of the importance of enclosure as a space not only critical for mystical experiences but crucial for the the personal and communal freedom that it provided, however briefly, for women in Quattrocento society.

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<sup>20</sup> Suor Illuminata Bembo describes Caterina's artistic inclinations thus: "E volentiere dipingea il Verbo Divino piccolino infasciato, e per molti luoghi del Monastero di Ferrara, e pei libri lo faceva così piccolino"; quoted in Ragg, *Women Artists of Bologna* 151.



Figure 1. Tintoretto, *Annunciation*. (from F. P. B. Osmaston, *The Art and Genius of Tintoret*, London: G. Bell and Sons, 1915).



Figure 2. Domenico Veneziano. *Annunciation* (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. From Raimond Van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1928, vol 10).



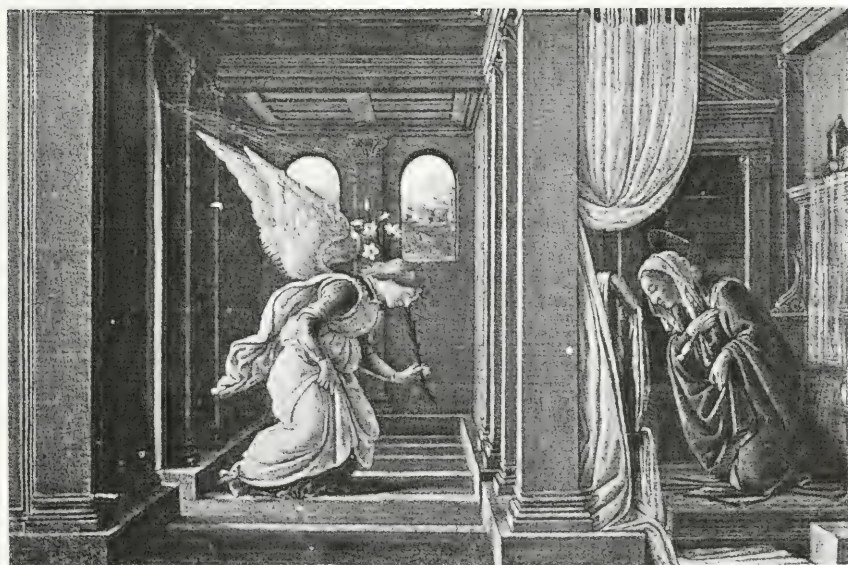


Figure 3. Botticelli, *Annunciation*, Berlin, Huldshinsky Collection (from Wilhelm Bode, *Sandro Botticelli*, London, Methuen, 1925).



Figure 4. *Miniature on vellum*. Convent of Corpus Domini, Bologna. (Printed with permission from Laura Bragg, *Women Artists of Bologna*, Methuen.)

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## Shaping Fantasies: Writing as Re-Vision in Caterina Vannini's Correspondence

Notwithstanding Agostino Saba's exacerbated determination to illustrate the insidious implications, both historical and literary, inherent in what he deems are misguided readings of Caterina Vannini's correspondence with Cardinal Federico Borromeo, one is nonetheless tempted to revisit the prohibited trodden path, as it were, in order not so much to challenge the dottier dicta of Saba's anathema with respect to the alleged unqualified critical stance of a broadly defined literary discourse as to discover authorial patterns of behaviour that would be conducive to an heretical re-reading of the woman mystic's letters.<sup>1</sup> Not that this journey would not be strewn with dangers. On the contrary, in their celebrated work on the writings of Italian women mystics, Giovanni Pozzi and Claudio Leonardi warn against this very itinerary of reading, as they call it, summarily dismissing "questa via, da noi non incoraggiata" (706).<sup>2</sup> But Saba's dogmatic scepticism in the intensive transcoding of a text to be both unstable and contextual, while attempting clearly to foreground the text's own proper placing and identity within a network of intrareferential discourses, does seem to impose hermeneutical closures intended to silence systematically, in my view, and in as far as Vannini's "mystical" writing is concerned, the enclosed or cloistered feminine voice from attributing order and coherence to her life-world.

The editorial success and the overriding importance of epistolary communication in the Italian sixteenth century is well known and documented. In the middle of that century, one of the leading men of letters in Italy,

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<sup>1</sup> In his volume *Federico Borromeo and the Mystics of His Time*, Saba is pitiless in his total condemnation of Pietro Misciattelli's both methodological approach and lack of any substantive documentation in the latter's treatment of Vannini's correspondence.

<sup>2</sup> For a selective bibliography on the mystical discourse and the literary text, see Pozzi-Leonardi, particularly 706-07, and in this volume the bibliographical essay by Mazzoni.

Gerolamo Muzio, expressed pretty well the thought of the day on letter writing in this fashion:

Certissima cosa è, che lo “scrivere delle lettere” non per altro è stato introdotto, se non per mantener viva la humana conversatione, la quale dalla lontananza essendo interrotta, senza quelle se ne verrebbe del tutto a morire.  
...<sup>3</sup>

And Francesco Sansovino, celebrated Cinquecento theorist of the epistolary genre and dedicated producer and consumer of letters, goes as far as stating that it is in the proper reading of the correspondence of illustrious minds that one often finds the very soul of the culture of the day.<sup>4</sup> While Caterina Vannini's letter writing seems to be generally secluded from the theoretical and canonical referents of her day, it is apparent that it is strongly motivated by the woman mystic's need to partake of this “humana conversatione” and to instantiate a discursive closeness with her privileged interlocutor and quintessentially patriarchal mentor: “. . . perché sapiate quando io vi scrivo parmi ragionare con esso voi . . .” (N. 123). Often deploying what one would have to term a rhetoric of reluctance in her letter writing, Vannini on the whole does seem aware of the need to systematize in a coherent scheme the language and the images of a consciousness and of a self knowledge that, dancing sensually in the ineffable embrace of the unnamable, defy her very body, and hence the bodily tools of naming and locating.

In this essay, I shall argue that Caterina Vannini's letter writing is a deftly veiled re-vision of her otherness, or perhaps, stated differently, of her true self — a re-vision ultimately intended to fashion a portrait of herself in which the mystical *coloratura* is but a heightened tonal register. The Shakespearean lexeme so seemingly unambiguous in the forefront of the title is not at all meant to be in any manner irreverent of Vannini's mystical experience, an experience in my view fully authenticated, and which, for the purposes of this study, will be treated somewhat obliquely.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, it posits a diffusing filter on the privileging and salvific process of this experience, much in keeping with the Siense mystic's overt desire to humanize and thus normalize paranormal or supernatural events. Federico Borromeo, in his *Della Vita della Madre Suor Caterina Sanese Monaca Convertita*, points out:

Ella nel vero non istimava le gratie divine come speciali suoi privilegi, né le sue proprie ricchezze le riputava, né delle sue opere si diletta farne

<sup>3</sup> See the dedicatory letter to Vincenzo Fedeli in *Lettere del Mutio Iustinopolitano*. On sixteenth-century epistolography, see Quondam's *Le carte messaggere*.”

<sup>4</sup> On Sansovino's multiplicitous activities as cultural operator in the Cinquecento see Grendler.

<sup>5</sup> For extensive documentation on Vannini's *Vita* (Borromeo's as well as others'), see Saba, particularly 95-121.



alcuna mostra. . . poi quando si haveva a parlare di visioni e di altre sue grandezze, quelle quanto più poteva diminuiva e nascondeva. Però le visioni chiamava ella pensieri, e le estasi sogni, e le altre rivelazioni sue proprie considerazioni, che nell'animo rivolgeva. . . .

(Saba 1884)

Notwithstanding the saintly cardinal's overt aspirations for an imminent beatification of the converted nun, Borromeo's attempt to illustrate the grandiose "maraviglia" of the mystic's life, while pointing to the rhetorical display of reluctance common to most mystical writing, does seem to corroborate in part Vannini's shaping of events.<sup>6</sup> I should also point out that the term "re-vision" is intended both in its usual acceptation as an act of revising, and in the sense of seeing again; that is, of providing commentary, of assigning some sort of order and coherence to what has been seen or experienced while in a state of highly imaginative conception.

Leaving aside Freudian theories on the universal impulse to create fantasies and on our common human desire to transcend an often unpleasant lot — psychoanalytic propositions that, if not properly postulated and thoroughly analyzed, can be found at best questionable when applied to works of literary men and women of the Renaissance — a close re-reading of Caterina Vannini's letters does suggest an authorially attentive, quasi-systematic fusion of fantasy, if we dare call in this manner what is seen with the neo-platonic mind's eye, and the real. In Vannini there is a free interplay of these two states and often, in fact, the nature of the real world is shaped or re-defined by reference to what is clearly viewed as an "other" and different, but certainly no less real, world. Of course, and it goes without saying, the point can be made that the reverse is equally true; that is to say, and here perhaps we return unconsciously to Freudian grounds, that our imagination is fuelled and shaped by the delusional phantasms of our worldly desires. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Duke Theseus attempts to crystallize that fleeting moment of creative process within the act of writing when the writer's pen, if we can still use this metonymic module in our brave new digital world of virtual reality, maps out a renewed vision:

And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

(V.i.14-17)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Proceedings for the beatification of Suor Caterina had already begun by 1606, the year of this mystic's death.

<sup>7</sup> For an exhilarating reading of Shakespeare's play as both producer and product of Elizabethan culture, see Montrose, to whom I am indebted for shaping part of this essay's title.

I suspect that the Duke, bodied forth and made incarnate by the fertile fantasy of an English poet of Vannini's own generation, had in mind adding our mystic to his elite elencation of lunatics, lovers, and poets who have "such shaping fantasies, that apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends . . .," had it not been for the cruel economy of the English verse. Interestingly, some of Vannini's spiritual directors such as Giorgio Giunti and Pier Luigi Capacci often touch, in their own correspondence with Cardinal Borromeo, on the altered states of our mystic by describing her as "pazzarella," "pazzuccia," "fraschetta," "piena di querele," "pazza, pazza" (Saba 114, 115). And in a letter of Giunti to Borromeo, dated the 21st of October, 1605, the former writes that Caterina "Mi par una figliola di un anno, piange, ride . . . non altrimenti che fanno li fanciulli" (Saba 113). While some of this behaviour clearly points to the subliminal state of grace and purity which informs so much of Vannini's last days, part of it can no doubt be ascribed to the flames of an all too human and pure love which can still burn within the heart of a mystic. It has been observed that "Il tratto singolare di questo epistolario sta nell'*apparenza* totalmente terrena e personale dell'amore che la veggente professa nei confronti dell' interlocutore . . ." (Pozzi 400, italics mine). Although applying modalities that diverge considerably from those supplied by Saba, Pozzi and Leonardi go to great lengths to attenuate the human face of a passionate love by suggesting that Caterina's peculiar "modi di dire" are meant to signify the essence of her unitive experience with God, an experience which the woman mystic "proietta dalla dualità dell'ente divino. È un'esperienza vissuta fuori da ogni misura finita" (400). While this critical foreplay tends to focus on the ambiguous nature of both the mystical experience and the actual writing of it, in the sense of locating spatial/linguistic paradigms best suited to situate the narrative, it does little, in my view, for the total recuperation of the text. To deny Vannini the full scope of her human amatory discourse, by subtly suggesting shades of an *occasio peccati*, is in my view analogous to casting a considerable shadow over the validity of her own commentary vis-à-vis her mystical experience. Love is for Caterina the one true *vinculum mundi*, and in some measure her earthly love is the ladder that leads her to ecstatic reunion with God, a veritable neo-platonic *scala coeli*, a system of thought which is profoundly rooted in the proliferation of fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries Italian love treatises best exemplified by Ficino, Equicola, and Leone Ebreo. This hermeneutic tradition had already been successfully entrenched in Italy in the numerous prose commentaries on verse texts, such as Dante's own commentary on the *Vita nuova* and the many commentaries on Cavalcanti's canzone "Donna mi prega," to mention but some of the most celebrated. I would suggest that by placing our woman mystic within the contextualizing parameters of a "platonic love" discourse, to use Ficino's own original use of the term to signify a rarefied and intellectual love between lovers based on a shared love of God, we would be in a better position to view her own writing as a type of prose commentary, what I refer to as re-

vision, of her real text, that inexpressible awareness of divine presence which seems to be properly transcribed by the ink of the mystic's tears.<sup>8</sup> It is well to bear in mind that in sixteenth-century Italy, both mysticism, broadly describing various dimensions of religious experience, and Platonic/Christian love were actual, vital realities whose phenomenological, psychological and metaphysical codifications transmuted the initial earthly impulse into a heightened knowledge both of oneself and of a higher world (Ficino 128).

In the light of these schematic considerations and of the theoretical premises thus far discussed, a re-reading of Caterina Vannini's correspondence which situates her amatory discourse, her earthly love story, as the one controlling female-configured construct, could well signal an impetus of novel interpretive hypotheses. While partly accepting Pozzi's and Leonardi's views on the Sieneese mystic's attempt at unitive harmony with God, an impulsive projection of the duality of her human love experience, I find striking cultural recalls of *stilnovistic* and Ficinian-Bembian strains in her text which clearly connote esoteric patterns of a love discourse exclusive to a select circle. Viewed in this light, the author's frequent outbursts of jealousy, for instance, or her quasi-pathological insistence on the elitist exclusiveness of her amorous rapport, behavioural modes either badly justified by her own confessors or unconvincingly commented by literary historians such as Saba and Misciattelli, could be revisited as dynamic topological structures at work within the textual environment. These are wider critical issues which do move beyond the modest scope of this essay and which, quite frankly, need to be addressed by deploying the type of rigorous philological penetration into the mystical discourse that is analogous to the system of investigative tools applied to the poetic or literary text, a mode of critical conduct hitherto only partly systematized insofar as mystically affected literature is concerned.<sup>9</sup> But let us now broach the Vanninian text at hand.

Love is unquestionably the shifting deity that inks forth in Caterina Vannini's pages. Its mysterious yet polyseptic gesturing often escapes the controlling mechanisms of its narrative form:

. . . perché io v'amo tanto che lingua umana non lo potrebbe mai dire né core capire se non Iddio, perché è stato el prencipio et el mezzo et sarà el fine; perché dice che questo trapassa tutti l'altri amori, io so bene che questo non fenisce mai anzi tuttavia cresce . . . quando io vi scrivo non posso trovare la via di fenire.

(N. 114)

<sup>8</sup> For the most authoritative commentary on Marsilio Ficino and his sphere of influence, see Kristeller.

<sup>9</sup> For a fruitful discussion of this see Agosti and also n. 2.



. . . vedete a me che v'amo daverò che quello che io scrivo mi esce dalle viscere del core.

(N. 115)

. . . ma io non posso più perché io non lo so quello ch'io mi scriva perché so' fuor di me, so' pazza et ho che fare; . . . A Dio, vedete quello che fa l'amore, m'ha fatto finire di scrivere che la cominciai nel dolore, e ora nell'allegrezza non posso finire. . . vita mia, è mio è mio è mio, felicità o Dio, perché non sete qua che non v'avrei a far scrivere queste cose che le saprei dire da me.

(N. 131)<sup>10</sup>

For the most part, however, love in the Vanninian text is the one single feature which, having controlled its writing, comes to our rescue in the proper reading of it. Caterina's written account of her great love for the cardinal, even when viewed as the earthly dimension of her soul's desire for Christ, cannot fail to provide a sense of measure and proportion to her life-world.<sup>11</sup> This desired sense of proportion brings into focus the very locus of the body as a Bakhtinian site to be mapped out and brought under control. Leaving aside notions of classical or finished as opposed to grotesque or unfinished body, a differentiated *habitus*,<sup>12</sup> to use Marcel Mauss's term, that could be applied fruitfully to the subject at hand, the Vanninian text does seem to offer glimpses of rhetorical strategies intended to equate the act of writing with techniques of the female body. By writing of her love to her loved one, Vannini is desirous both of humanizing her love and of locating it. It is an attempt at shaping fantasies, at naming them, for fear that they may otherwise well lose themselves, as her own body often does, in the unnamed, unchartered, and unfinished immanence of that blissful void. In her quest for expressiveness, nothing is more telling than Caterina's privileging positioning of her body. In the exchange of gifts that accompanies a good part of their correspondence, Caterina finds favour understandably with the olfactory nature of the roses sent to her — though only if they come from "his garden" — but mostly with a robe that the good cardinal had thoughtfully provided for her:

. . . e mi sono tagliata la tonacha per questa pasqua per farmi bellina e voi non mi vedrete; si voi non m'intendessi è quella che voi mi mandaste. . . io porto la tonachina che voi m'avete fatto. Io come potrò vi consolarò. A Dio.

(N. 133)

<sup>10</sup> As in the already quoted letter, N. 123, Saba's system of numbering will be followed throughout this essay.

<sup>11</sup> See Weaver's fine pages on sensual love and mystical tradition in her discussion of Sister Beatrice del Sera's *Amor di virtù* in Rose's volume on literary and historical perspectives on *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*.

<sup>12</sup> On the body as a site of conflict, see the celebrated study by Bakhtin on Rabelais.

And even more remarkable is this gesture of sending off to him herself, her own body:

. . . io crederò che a quest'ora sarà arrivato, mi par millanni di sapere si gli è arrivato a salvamento e fate carezze a la monachina che l'ho vestita come me collo scapurale negro si como el nostro abito negro e bianco e il rosaro al braccio e colla S. Corona; in somma io v'ho mandato mé stessa. . . vi mandarò la dichiarazione delle figure del libro e non vel'ho mandate per quel che v'ho detto di sopra, cioè che voi non haveste abbandonato la vostra piccinina e che l'avesse di modo sbandita dal vostro stato che più non volesse sentire di lei; basta che vi scriva el tutto. A Dio, sono tutta vostra sono tutta sono tutta travagliata, pregate Dio per me, questa lettera è tutta errori però son fra di noi non importa.

(N. 131)<sup>13</sup>

Misciattelli is awed by the intensive codification of this ludic "monachina," this play doll, but is not quite sure of what to make of it:

Questi piccoli doni che si scambiavano i due amici ci mostrano come forse a loro insaputa, attraverso i colloqui, e per i messaggi epistolari quasi quotidiani, si fosse acceso in essi un affetto umano.

(76)

Romanzo d'un'anima è, veramente, questo strano epistolario della nostra mistica senese, ove ribollono purificate le passioni dell'antica cortigiana ch'ella cercava di soffocare con le preghiere, le penitenze, invocando disperatamente la morte ch'era ormai vicina.

(80)

Although the Italian critic seemingly intuitively feels the strong need, on the part of the Sienese nun, literally to take a hold of her own body, to place it in its proper state, which is in the arms of her loved one, he is clearly at a loss as to the unequivocal equivalences that Vannini is postulating vis-à-vis her body, the body of a cloistered nun, and the shaping, locating, and interpreting that her writing is applying to it. In a letter (N. 129) she had written just a few days

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps it is worth noting, in passing, one of Saba's typical comments with respect to Vannini's text. In his avowed stance to defend the illustrious cardinal from any defamatory readings, Saba, in interpreting the essence of this particular letter, points out that Borromeo, "conoscendo l'infermità di Caterina, anche dalle lettere del Capacci, si piaceva paternamente di assicurare 'la piccinina' che le voleva del bene. Delicatissimo pensiero quello di avvicinarsi alla debolezza umana, per confortarla, prendendo occasione anche di ciò che i ruvidi chiamerebbero difetti gravi." By "paternamente," Saba wishes to foreground the ecclesial and perhaps spiritual superiority of the cardinal, the latter being two years younger than our Caterina.

earlier, a letter dictated to Capacci, in which Caterina pontificates on the hermeneutic possibilities inherent in a proper reading of her work on the Rosary<sup>14</sup> (a book frequently mentioned in the epistolary narrative and whose illustrations apparently she drew), our mystic explicitly points out to the cardinal:

Nell'altra parte del libro ove è l'Assumpta, v'è una Monaca, et due a piedi dell'Assumpta in forma di Sante, et una da un canto in forma di Maddalena, queste quattro figure hanno una istessa cosa, cioè la medesima persona, *ma la monaca rappresenta il corpo* et l'altre tre l'anima. . . .

(italics mine)

Vannini's letters, in as much as they appear to be modes of textualizing, fictionalizing and codifying the author's life world, are meant to provide a decorous and luculent commentary, a veiled re-vision, of her private events. The re-vision is clearly actuated in these highly interpretive excursions intended to stabilize and thus control the very reading of the text for this very privileged reader. Her potent attempt to de-literalize meaning by literally extracting it from the written text and sending it, as it were, as an accompanying supplement to it as in the just quoted passage on the "monachina," while underscoring the woman mystic's suspicion in the representational validity of any text, does at the same time inscribe functional intertextual icons dynamically playing on the total recollection of meaning.<sup>15</sup> The deliciously subversive gesture of offering her body for love ("fate carezze"), therefore, an eponymous pseudo-fetish that provokes, as we have seen, moral reconsiderations about her past courtesan activities, clearly situates that same body, as love bodied forth, both as the most potent factor that determines and controls proper reading and as the most representative shaping device in the *corpus* of the epistolary narrative: "la monaca rappresenta il corpo."

Vannini's writing of her visions offers a commentary which is for the most part patterned on the rhythm and on the sensistic functions and reactions of her

<sup>14</sup> In his *Vita*, the cardinal speaks well of the book's literary and spiritual merits. It must be noted, as Saba has often suggested, that Borromeo's rendering of Vannini's life events could well balance some of the more questionable issues in the nun's correspondence. In the rather suspicious absence, however, of his letters to her, letters apparently and systematically burned by our mystic at his request, one ought to proceed cautiously in analyzing any form of *contaminatio* in the two documents.

<sup>15</sup> Vannini often underscores in her letter writing the perceived futility of just such an endeavour, although, partly as a result of her rhetorical strategy of reluctance, she circumvents and in a sense legitimates this exercise in the case of cardinal Borromeo by her most tender love for him, as she is fond of saying (N. 124, 126, 127). On this point see Ricoeur's fascinating meditations on the dichotomy of interpretation as "recollection of meaning" and as "exercise of suspicion" in his study *Freud and Philosophy*.



body. The very bodily habit that fashions her persona is intended to heighten the overall sensual tonality of the fantasy. Amid the desired equivalences of the mind's eyes with the body's eyes, neo-platonic features regularly punctuated in her letters, and the unequivocal affinities that harmonize earthly love and heavenly love — “. . . tutto il cielo che ne i colori corrisponde similmente alle solennità che si fanno in terra . . .” — amid the heavenly laughter transmuted into the mystic's joyous tears with its consequent unnamed interpretative modalities, Caterina views herself “con un camice bianco indosso, et con una stola rossa, et con una ghirlanda in testa, di diverse sorte di fiori, turchini rossi bianchi et gialli . . .” (N.107). This potent transcodification of the amatory discourse in the pastoral tradition so rampant in the last decades of the Cinquecento in Italy, an ephemeral discourse given substance by just such beautiful nymphs, gardens, flowers, and wreaths, seems to legitimate at the poetic level Caterina's re-vision of her other worldly conception. This re-vision is further given an intertextual identity and a contextualizing difference in cardinal Borromeo's *Vita* of Vannini (Saba 143, 145, 158). The spellbound sensuality of this celestially bucolic *locus*, however, goes well beyond the bounds of any acceptable shaping, and Caterina, in the final stages of her letter, fearing a complete mismanagement of the feelings which accompany her re-visionary writing, attempts to modify somewhat her stance:

. . . è Catherina, è Catherina; mi pigliano et mi mettono in quella sedia cantando et dicendo, viva Catherina con Maria nostra regina, gettandomi addosso fiori, poi mi rizzo di quella sedia et mi fanno forza che io mi fermi un poco più, et io rispondo, no, bisogna andare a orare et a guadagnare, che qui non c'è se non sensualità. . . .

(N. 107)

This type of sensuality is also given free reign in another re-vision of a quasi-oniric sequence in which at first the Cardinal is seen in bed seemingly suffering from what she deems is some sort of temptation (“. . . che significava tentazione et mi pregavate che io non mi partissi . . .” [N.112]), and then at the dinner table “. . . quasi in atto di havere a mangiare.” Refusing to accept male gendered nourishment, Borromeo opts for Caterina's delicate and well shaped fruit and libation:

. . . non voglio vostri frutti né vostre vivande che sono grossolane, voglio di quelli di Caterina, sono delicati et ben fatti et in quello istante comparse una fanciulla in habito di Ninfa, era svelta et succinta, vestita tutta di colore rosso, in testa haveva e capelli rossi e tutti aricciati come si dimostrano gli Angeli et con grandissima diligentia et con prestezza vi messe innanzi i nappi di frutti e di vivande che haveva in mano li quali pigliaste con allegrezza grande dicendo: questi sono delicati et de queste voglio, et lo gustavate con gran piacere, questo in sustanza fu quel che io viddi et intesi.

Hor chi fusse quella Ninfa, quelli huomini malfatti et quelle loro vivande lo intendarete da per voi. Dio me ne dia la gratia che quella Ninfa gli habbia scacciati tutti; io non ho mai desiderato altro da voi che di esser sola che voi non amiate altri che quella Ninfa, poi che io ricevevo e tanto contento di vedere che voi non volevi altri fruti che da quella fanciulla. . . .

(N.114)

While Vannini is apparently expecting that the literate Borromeo apply the usual male-configured interpretative criteria to the text at hand, her re-visionary tendencies engage her in supplying him with the necessary rhetorical tools in order to transform his act of reading into a complicitous response to her shaping techniques. That this is so is amply demonstrated throughout the corpus of her writing by her insistence on procuring interpretative models not only for the proper reading of her letters, but for a fruitful and enjoyable reading of her book on the Holy Rosary (N. 118, 129) as well as for a balanced interpretation of her drawings (N. 110, 115). Her self-fashioning as a woman of taste in matters of art and letters, notwithstanding her rhetorical infrastructure of reluctance, is further illustrated not only by the articulate commentary she provides for her celestial excursions (N. 119) but also by her not infrequent intervention in social and cultural matters such as the manner in which one ought to deliver a sermon, for instance, or in which one ought to interpret a painting (N.118, 121). This self-knowledge clearly derives in part from her gifted station in life as a nun-nymph, as we have seen, who can intercede in heavenly spheres and thus help to direct people's lives. But it also derives from a diffused perception of her extra-terrestrial powers, a perception of which she is clearly aware and which she seems to package well for a proper dispensation of her image. As part of this image, she misses no opportunity to admonish severely yet most affectionately her beloved prelate on the few occasions when the latter slips badly with respect to a Christian life's most cherished values. An example of this is her reaction to Borromeo's plan to begin the preparatory work for the construction of his future sepulchre:

Mi ricordo che quando voi fuste qua mi diceste il pensiero che havevate di fare il vostro sepolcro et io non risposi nulla perché dentro a me medesima non la sentii, et della stessa ispirazione sono stata sempre di poi, et vorrei che noi pensassimo di fare un bel sepolcro all'anima nostra, con le vive operationi, et dei corpi ne lasciassimo la cura a chi restarà doppo noi che poco importa; la spesa la potete bene impiegare o nel sacrificio delle messe o in altro come più vi piacerà pur che non s'habbia riguardo al corpo.

(N.120)

Having reminded the good cardinal of these basic tenets for the deployment of a truly saintly life, the Sieneese mystic finds it opportune to add a few sugar coated lines:

Mi piace grandemente l'altro pensiero di renuntiare quella Abatia per fare quella opera così christiana, et mi assicuro che ogni giorno più la vostra coscienza ne restarà consolata et il mondo bene edificato, et quanto più presto vi risolverete tanto sarà meglio. Intorno al fare voi vita di maggiore penitentia, io non so darvi altro consiglio che quello che ho preso per me. . . però mi pare che voi non facciate altro fino che non ci parliamo a bocca se a Dio piacerà perché molte cose si possono dire che non si possono scrivere. . . . Io vi mando quelli scritti che più volte m'avete chiesti e quello vi sarà la vostra mancia; . . . A Dio, non posso star più che la vostra cittina non può più. Mercoledì ci partiremo con l'aiuto di Giesù per andare in Betleme.

(N.120)

From these lines, and mindful of the earlier segnic virtuality of the body, it is evident that our woman mystic takes great care in marketing, as it were, her image in a way that well befits her stature, which is clearly one, notwithstanding again her avowed stance of authentic reluctance, of saint in waiting. The *congedo*'s striking dualism, a strategy she frequently deploys (N.125, 132) — one inherent in the loving tenderness of "la vostra cittina" and the subsequent miraculous pilgrimage to Bethlehem — is a potent reminder to the cardinal of her ambiguous virtues.

As in much mystical literature, the pilgrimage frame is but one of the various working schemes that are capable of simulating analogous *loci* in non-affective or genre-codified, poetically driven literary ventures. The earthly longing for the distant lover in a forlorn place, for instance, can be adequately accommodated by the utter mobility of the mystic's body, as we have observed in Caterina's own techniques of the body, both in the sense of the body/doll metaphor and in the sense of her bodily presence in rescuing the poor cardinal from drowning (N. 114). The ladder metaphor, as we have seen, is another mystical frame that can make extremely good use of the literariness of the neoplatonic discourse. Yet another literary borrowing is the deepening choreography of the love and marriage frame. Fully aware that the mystical marriage, along with the Assumption motif, are significant topological structures in the mystical experience, and hence strongly malleable shaping devices, Vannini works out a vivid connectedness of the two, which results in a felicitous self-containedness of events that had taken place some decades earlier. In her re-vision, in fact, the Sienese mystic is desirous of attributing order and coherence to her life-world. Thus, the "Sposalitio" or marriage account is presented as a proper prelude to the Assumption re-vision. Both visions had been announced by Caterina in a previous letter (N. 115), in which, clarifying her wish to dictate the two missives in question to Capacci, she also makes manifest her resolve to form a link between the two:



... ma dell' Assunta mi risolvo bene di farla scrivere a lui, perché el'è cosa longa per esservi incatenato el mio sposalitio cioè quando io per misericordia d'Iddio ebbi ell'anello . . . e non vi maravigliate, che io sia stata tanto a scriverlo, perché non volevo mettere queste gran cose in persona che non durasse in verso di me, che non havesse particolarità intrinseca; . . . hora m'avete sicurato con vostre lettere: voi mi amate tanto . . .

(N. 115)

This self-assuring love quite adroitly paves the way for the lengthy and meticulously detailed "Sposalitio" letter. It is not surprising that the same amorous self-assurance should introduce the successive re-vision, that is, the writing on the Assumption. In fact, in a curious note from Caterina to the cardinal, a letter left unnumbered but clearly linking the two paranormal events, the mystic nun reiterates the quasi-ritualizing formulation: ". . . sì come intendo di voi che volete eser mio tutto tutto." The "Sposalitio" re-vision is overly punctuated by the *planctus* gesturing on the part of the mystic, a clear signal of human expressiveness in the celestial spheres, one which is, alas, seemingly and utterly misinterpreted by the entire heavenly hierarchy. This mode of signification, however, is clearly a fashioning tool for our mystic, who is no doubt aware of the highly coded trope both in the love lyric tradition and in mystical writing *tout court* (Pozzi, 22). This literary self-fashioning is further evidenced by the *incipit* of the letter which exudes an unequivocal air of doxified narrative representation:

... sonno già vinti anni in circa del mese d'Agosto in giorno di lunedì, el vicino alla Madonna d'Agosto che una mattina nel fare del giorno essendo sola in cella et dandomi la disciplina secondo il solito, et leggendo quel Psalmo, Dominus illuminatio mea, quando fui a quel versetto: pater meus et mater mea dereliquerunt me, mi fu messa la mano sopra il libro dove leggevo, et in un istante mi viddi circondata da diverse persone della Patria celeste. . . .

(N. 116)

This type of rhetorical recall of pseudo-Biblical events provides an authenticating timbre to the verisimilar resonance of the story, legitimating both its sensorial patterns and the hermeneutic apertures tirelessly advanced by the writer-protagonist.

The innumerable interpretive constructs that populate Vannini's letters are, indeed, the shaping blocks of her fantasies. These very blocks come into play to enhance the heavenly pastoral proscenium of "prati fioriti, et herbe fresche et odorifere" which lead to the "Crystal Palace," veritable fulcrum of the Heavenly Court. Throughout the narrative, Caterina is most attentive to providing both the choreography of the original vision and the critical commentary aimed at

naming and locating that particular event. And her re-vision, clothed as it is in the charisma of her *gratia gratis data*, effects a contextualizing habitus to the unstable parameters of the original vision/fantasy. These authorially activated patterns of behaviour are ultimately intended, in my view and as I have attempted to articulate, to fictualize and hence to codify her life/text. In other words, it seems to me that Vannini's shaping devices and re-visionary gesturing, beyond establishing what I have termed naming and locating, do point at providing a literary *coloratura* to the very act of writing or self-shaping. This would be in keeping with her frequent and ostentatious posturing as critic/artist/writer and with her constant preoccupations with the modalities and stylistic features of letter writing. Her subtle advocacy for literariness in her writing is perhaps best exemplified by the obsessive use of the wreath code, a literary feature which, although utilized by almost all mystics in their visionary narratives, is handled by Vannini in ways that are strongly evocative of its deployment as social diversion from the *Filocolo* onward into the highly skilled and eruditely eroticized discourse of the Italian pastoral pleasance. The artfully spiritualized and potently sensualized "corona"/"ghirlanda" re-vision stands perhaps as the primary representational mode of Caterina's troubled soul: a woman in love, a woman mystic who, while identifying herself as "un pelago di miserie" (N. 131), knows full well that even more passionately and just as poetically she is one who lives "come lo sparviere che vive di cori" (N. 126). The highly coded rhythm of the crown/wreath game of the poetic text, a rhythm seemingly unstable in its segnic gesturing, yet considerably contextual in shaping the nature of that very text, appears to function well as a shaper of fantasies in Vannini's life-text in that it posits authoritatively upon the body of our "monachina" the longed for inscription of nymph and saint.

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Armando Maggi

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## The Voice and the Silences of Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi

Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi was born in Florence in 1566. When she was sixteen, she entered the carmelite convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli, where she died at the age of 41. After an almost mortal disease at the age of 16, she began having frequent visions, in which she conversed with the Word and the Father. Her convent sisters developed a complex method in order to transcribe everything she said during her raptures. When Maria Maddalena recovered from her visions, her sisters asked her to help them edit their transcriptions. *I colloqui* is the two-volume book containing the Saint's most interesting visions, from December 1584 to June 1585.<sup>1</sup>

It is crucial to remember that *I colloqui* is essentially a transcription of the Saint's utterances, or at least this is how the authors — both the nuns and the Saint herself — ask the reader to consider it. It would not be correct if we simply examined the content of her words without taking into account the orality of her text. Indeed, by examining the Saint's voice we also clarify the sense of her utterances, since her voice, albeit missing from the written page, is the necessary complement to the written content of her speeches. Moreover, we are able fully to understand *I colloqui* only when we realize that we, as readers, share the Saint's anguished urge toward language. As it should be clear at the end of this paper, beyond any specific mystical meaning *I colloqui* argues for the human necessity of expression.

Maria Maddalena's *I colloqui* is primarily a transcription of her spoken

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<sup>1</sup> The most important studies on the Saint's raptures are the following: Pozzi. *Le parole dell'estasi*; Catena. *Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, Orientamenti spirituali e ambiente in cui visse*; Secondin. *Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, Esperienza e dottrina*; Ancilli. *Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi. Estasi, Dottrina, Influsso*; Maggi. "Blood as Language in the Visions of Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi." I use the following edition of the Saint's visions: *Tutte le opere di Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, dai manoscritti originali*.

discourses.<sup>2</sup> Maria Maddalena's voice is first and foremost a response to God's words. As those who recorded Maria Maddalena's voice often point out, the Saint entered a rapture after having remembered or listened to a passage of the Gospel. In some cases, she had a vision after having attended the morning mass. For instance, at the very beginning of *colloquio* 4 the transcribers state: "... ci disse che si sentì tirare dal Signore nella considerazione dell'ultima parte dell'Evangelio che si era detto nella Messa ..." (1:82); in *colloquio* 13 we read: "... et ci disse ch'el suo discorso era stato sopra l'Evangelio della Messa della domenica che si era detta innanzi ci comunicassimo ..." (1:155). In other cases, the Saint has a new vision by simply bringing to mind a specific passage of the Gospel. For instance, in *colloquio* 6 the nuns state: "... gli venne innanzi alla mente quell'ultima parola che Jesu disse in Croce: *Consummatum est*, nella considerazione della quale fu trata al solito dal Signore ..." (1:99).

As the above excerpts point out, Maria Maddalena enters a new rapture because some biblical passages have touched her. The Saint perceives God's words as specifically directed to her: she cannot help but answer Him. We can understand the sense of God's words if we interpret them in light of Searle's notion of illocutionary acts, i.e., those linguistic performances through which a speaker expresses his personal intention to a hearer (Searle 54-71). Whenever we state something, Searle says, we direct our statement to someone in particular. A speaker is always engaged in a specific relationship with his hearer; a speaker asks his interlocutor to respond to his statement in some particular way. As far as God's words are concerned, they belong to the so-called directive illocutionary acts. God's statements, as they are reported in the sacred texts, contain a request.<sup>3</sup> To listen to divine words means to perceive their strong request.

Let us try to understand what kind of request God formulates, at least as it is perceived and communicated by Maria Maddalena. John states in his Gospel that the Savior, God's Son, is first and foremost the "Word." Maria Maddalena, as every other mystic, understands this aspect as absolutely crucial. In his sermons

<sup>2</sup> Zumthor holds that some literary texts give out a sort of subdued noise, which is the original orality of the text itself. Each text, Zumthor says, has a different *index of orality*, which must be taken into account in our reading. By index of orality Zumthor means the intervention of human voice within the written text: "Au reste, il nous arrive souvent de percevoir dans le texte la rumeur, éclatante ou confuse, d'un discours parlant de la voix même qui le porte. Chaque texte en cela demeure incomparable et exige une écoute singulière: il comporte ses propres *indices d'oralité*. . . Par indice d'oralité, j'entends tout ce qui, à l'intérieur d'un texte, nous renseigne sur l'intervention de la voix humaine dans sa publication. . . ." It is almost needless to say that in *I colloqui* it is fundamental to take into account its extremely high "index of orality." While we read this text, it is a voice that is talking to us.

<sup>3</sup> De Certeau hints at this aspect of Searle's philosophy of language in a central part of his *La Fable mystique*, when he specifically speaks of the "will" (*le vouloir*) expressed by the mystical word: "Sur le mode linguistique [mystique, il y a] la violence, et même la fureur, d'un Vouloir" (231). See also: "Parole de Dieu." *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique* 750-58

the German mystic Meister Eckhart had already underscored that

. . . God is a word that speaks itself. Wherever God is, he speaks this Word; wherever he is not, he does not speak. God is spoken and unspoken. The Father is a speaking work, and the Son is a speech working. . . . all creatures want to utter God in all their works; they all come as close as they can in uttering him, and yet they cannot utter him. . . . God is above names and above nature.

(204).<sup>4</sup>

God, says Meister Eckhart, is a word "that speaks itself" through his Son, the Word. However, Eckhart adds, the divine word is both "spoken and unspoken." What Meister Eckhart means is that God has a twofold relation to language. In order to exist, God's being must be "uttered" through his Son by every believer. However, man cannot express the Word. The Word is doomed to remain unexpressed; the expression of the Word is a divine grace.

Let us now analyze how Maria Maddalena interprets her own spoken discourse. In *colloquio* 12, after having remembered the biblical expression "Eructavit cor meum verbum bonum, dico ego opera mea Regi" (Ps. 44, 1), Maria Maddalena clearly states that she aims to express the Word:

O Jesu mio, hora che voi siete in me posso ben dire quelle parole di Davide: Eructavit cor meum verbum bonum, dico ego opera mea Regi. Io eructerò, cioè manderò fuori la parola buona, el verbo buono che siete voi, o Jesu mio, il quale tengo nel mio cuore serrato.

(1:152).<sup>5</sup>

Maria Maddalena perceives God's words, either read or listened to during the Mass, as a request for being. God asks her to "utter" His word, and thus to give voice to His being. Indeed, the most frequent term used by the Saint to address the divinity is "Verbo" (Word). In the first *colloquio* the initial words pronounced by the Saint are "Verbum caro factum est" and "in principium erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum," as if the authors and/or the Saint wanted the reader to understand the Word as the leitmotif of the entire text. We should

<sup>4</sup> Meister Eckhart also suggests: ". . . be silent, and do not chatter about God; for when you do chatter about him, you are telling lies and sinning. But if you want to be without sin and perfect, you should not chatter about God" (207). Joseph Quint discusses this theme in *Altdeutsche und Altniederländische Mystik*. In the second part of this essay we shall see how silence plays a crucial role in Maria Maddalena's relationship with the divinity.

<sup>5</sup> The expression "eructavit verbum bonum" has a totally different meaning in Saint Bernard's (67. 3-5). He actually interprets the verb "eructare" as "to belch forth." He holds that, when the soul is full with God's grace, she "belches forth" the Word. The difference between Maria Maddalena's interpretation and Saint Bernard's is apparent: whereas in Saint Bernard the act of belching out the Word signifies the soul's content with His grace, in Maria Maddalena "eructare" primarily means "give linguistic expression" to the Word. "Eructare" is synonym with "to speak."



also remember that the first “colloquio” opens with a fundamental religious feast: the Holy Name of Jesus, celebrated on January 1. Still in *colloquio* 1, the nuns go back to some of Maria Maddalena’s previous raptures, starting with that one she had had at Christmas. It is important to stress that Christmas commemorates the incarnation of the Word in the world. These are the central premises of all *I colloqui*: the name of the Word and His birth among and within us:

Martedì addì primo di Gennaio 1584 che era la festa del Santissimo Nome di Gesù, ci congregammo insieme, in esso Santo Nome, con la diletta anima . . . gli cominciamo a domandare quello ch’el Signore s’era degnato comunicarli la notte del Santo Natale di Jesu . . . cominciando con quelle parole di San Giovanni; *Et Verbum Caro factum est*, e quell’altre; *In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum*. . .

(1:51)

However, Maria Maddalena does not limit the use of the term “Word” only to the first *colloquio*. She repeats it in almost every chapter of *I colloqui*. In some cases she discusses its meaning, as if she aimed to clarify some of its unique aspects. For instance, in *colloquio* 38 Maria Maddalena distinguishes between the word, human linguistic expression, and the Word, divine language. She reminds us that God’s glory lies in the Word’s voice:

La idea tua, la potentia tua, la bontà tua, tutto è un dire in Verbo Domini. In Verbo Domini insperavi, requievi e inclinavi anima mea. . . . Il verbo procedendo dal Verbo, ci va comunicando il Verbo e l’unisce con noi. Voleva dire che la parola di Dio quale è proceduta dalla bocca di Jesu Verbo umanato, mentre che la c’è proferita, e la stiamo a udire, essa ci comunica e ci unisce a esso dal quale è proceduta, che è Jesu.

(1:435)

In another passage from *colloquio* 15 the Saint goes on to distinguish human voice, which can only convey an ephemeral word, from God’s voice, which is His eternal being:

Ha collocato il Padre Eterno . . . la destra sua alla sua destra, principalmente per queste tre virtù, da lui tanto esercitate in tutta la sua vita, ma particolarmente nella Sua Santissima Passione. La verità prima, in averci manifestato e fatto noto il suo Padre e se stesso che sono la stessa Verità. . . . È verità ancora la sua santa voce, però che essa è quella che permane in eterno. *La voce delle creature non è se non quel poco di suono che si sente e poi svanisce; ma quella di Jesu sempre permane, tanto che Verità è proprio l’esser di Dio, e ancora la sua voce.*

(1:172-173; emphasis mine)

Maria Maddalena also makes very frequent use of this term in the expression "Verbum caro factum est." By using this biblical expression the Saint underscores that "Word" and divine being are synonyms: divine word is embodied in His only-Begotten, Jesus, who was made flesh and died for all humanity. God's Word, one might say, is His flesh, His body. "Verbum caro factum est" could be actually seen as the thematic expression of the whole text. In *colloqui* 26 and 28, for instance, the Saint enters a new vision by meditating on this very expression (1:281; 1:292). In *colloquio* 33, Maria Maddalena even asks Saint Augustine to write "Verbum caro factum est" in her heart: "Al 'Verbum caro factum est'. . . el sangue c'è — il calamaio è aperto, non tardare Agostino" (1:343).<sup>6</sup>

However, although God asks her to utter His Word and thus to evoke His being, the Saint perceives this task as unachievable, for God's word essentially differs from hers. Whereas the divine word coincides with His being, her language is only a repeated attempt to evoke God's presence.<sup>7</sup> If we employ Saussurean terminology, we might say that in the Saint's language the signifier is never fully expressed, or better yet, that the speaker, the Saint herself, constantly doubts that the ultimate signifier, God Himself, can be expressed through her words. Michel de Certeau synthesizes this point in the following way: "Chaque 'objet' du discours mystique s'inverse en trace d'un Sujet toujours passant. La mystique ne rassemble donc ses pratiques et ne les règle qu'au nom de quelque chose dont elle ne saurait faire un objet . . . et qui ne cesse de la juger en lui échappant" (105).<sup>8</sup> The ultimate Subject of the mystical language, the divinity Himself, de Certeau says, "escapes" any attempt the speaker makes to pin Him down.

*I colloqui* could be seen as an attempt to give human voice to God's word. Throughout the text Maria Maddalena strives to conjure up the divinity by

<sup>6</sup> Saint Augustine is a crucial figure for Maria Maddalena. One could say that he is the saint/writer. In several passages Maria Maddalena relates Saint Augustine to the act of writing down some spoken words. See, for instance, *colloqui* 39 and 48.

<sup>7</sup> In *colloquio* 11 (1:145-146) the Saint speaks of the "idle word" ("parola otiosa"), which prevents God from meeting with us. Our idle word is a "stain" on our soul: God cannot tolerate it. Although this idle word sometimes could seem a minimum flaw to us, it actually makes our communication with the Word impossible: "Dico di una minima imperfettione, tale che una parola otiosa che noi diciamo impedisce che Dio non può far con noi quella unione che farebbe, sendo tanto puro che gli è a nausea il vedere la macchia di quella parola otiosa che è in quell'anima; la quale parola otiosa se bene a noi par cosa piccola, nondimeno imbratta l'anima. . . ."

<sup>8</sup> Ribettes describes obsessive discourse in a similar way. He states that one who suffers from this mental disorder tends to "recollect" all the signifiers, without ever being able to find the original signifier, that which caused his frantic search: "La discursivité obsessionnelle s'essaie . . . à la récollection des signifiants, à leur comptage exhaustif, afin de vérifier la saturation, répertorier le classement, organiser des modèles, refaire la mémoire d'un catalogue . . . pour (re)trouver celui des signifiants qui y manque(ra). . ." (136).

means of her human language. It is only at the end of the text that Maria Maddalena momentarily succeeds in actually uttering the divine word. In some parts of her last visions, her sisters say, the Saint modulates two voices, her own and that of God. In *colloquio* 46, for instance, her fellow nuns are amazed by her capacity to change radically the tone of her voice. When she talks as God, they say, the Saint has a powerful voice, whereas when she speaks as herself her voice becomes very humble:

Parlò sempre in tutto questo ratto con l'eterno padre, e il Padre parlava con lei, rispondendogli et lei interrogando, come dir quasi a modo di dialogo . . . era uno stupore a sentirla, però che diceva quelle cose con una maestà e con una grandezza. Et quando parlava in persona sua le diceva con un modo humile e con una summissione, parlando così un poco piano. . . .

(2:195)

When she succeeds in expressing God's voice, Maria Maddalena accomplishes the so-called *unio mystica*, the amorous encounter between God and the mystic. However, she does not achieve her goal once and for all. As later transcriptions of her visions confirm, both in *I colloqui* and in later volumes such as *I quaranta giorni*, *Probatione* and *Revelatione e intelligentie*, *unio mystica* is transitory. Maria Maddalena's search for the divine word seems to have no end.<sup>9</sup>

We have seen so far that God's language expresses a specific request. Let us try now to understand how Maria Maddalena responds to the divine word. The Saint knows that she has difficulty in uttering God's word, which coincides with His being. Although she senses that her repeated attempts are doomed to fail, the Saint however never rejects God's request. She knows that she must respond to Him; she cannot help but speak.<sup>10</sup> Prior to any specific content, her language expresses a necessity; the actual theme of her discourses is temporally secondary to her urge toward language, what de Certeau calls "l'impétuosité d'une énonciation [mystique]" (202). We would fail to understand fully the Saint's discourse if we limited ourselves to the content of her text. Her discourse arises from a sense of lack, that is, from her being aware that God's word cannot be uttered. The actual source of her utterances is her disquiet and uneasiness that pervade all her visions. Her speaking, one might say, is an act of awareness. She speaks because she is aware of her despair. What she actually says follows a pre-

<sup>9</sup> A fundametal element of Maria Maddalena's *unio mystica* is its incommunicability. In other words, when the Saint momentarily accomplishes her *unio mystica*, her linguistic discourse turns into a very formal, highly stylized sermon, delivered by God Himself through the Saint's voice. In fact, at that moment the reader cannot participate in the Saint's emotions. Although the Saint's *unio mystica* is expressed through language, she cannot share her feelings with her hearers and/or her readers.

<sup>10</sup> Michel de Certeau says about Juan de la Cruz's poetry: "A l'absence du Verbe, s'oppose une assurance: il doit parler" (217).



linguistic state of mind.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in *colloquio* 6 Maria Maddalena says that language always springs from "a copiousness of the heart" ("un'abbondanza del cuore"), as if she wanted to stress the close relationship between inner feelings and linguistic expression (1:101). We could synthesize this crucial point by using one of Derrida's observations from *La voix et le phénomène*: "... tout ce qui constitue l'effectivité du prononcé, ... le corps de la parole ... est sinon hors discours, du moins étranger à l'expressivité comme telle, à cette intention pure sans laquelle il ne saurait y avoir de discours" (36).<sup>12</sup> Derrida goes on to say that the "body" of the word, the actual content conveyed by a speaker's voice, is somehow external to the speaker's intention of saying. More than saying something and before saying something, Maria Maddalena must speak. Since her words primarily express her anguish and her frustration, Maria Maddalena formulates a request; she asks for understanding.

However, a crucial question arises: To whom does the Saint address her words, and thus also her request? Of course, one could say that Maria Maddalena interacts with several interlocutors, who are the actual addressees of her discourse. In *I colloqui* she "meets" angels, devils, the Virgin Mary and several saints, among them Saint Augustine and Saint Catherine, as well as the Father and the Son (whom in most cases Maria Maddalena calls "the Word" 'il Verbo'). However, the Saint frequently exchanges only brief statements with her interlocutors; she moves from one holy figure to the next without any apparent logic. For instance, in *colloquio* 48, where she performs a one-actress mystical play based on the moments following the Savior's death, Maria Maddalena simply hints at her numerous interlocutors, such as the Magdalen, the Virgin Mary, many of Jesus's disciples, and His murderers. More importantly, we should remember that in several cases Maria Maddalena does not have an apparent interlocutor; she rather seems to talk to herself.<sup>13</sup> For example, let us read a short passage from "colloquio" 30: "Sì, alla corona di spine — nove e — o gli angeli e — la santissima Trinità — o, io non intendo io — o tanta ignoranza — e, e, ci è non so che, che non mi lassa intendere — horsù, honorar voi poi" (1:308). Who is the addressee of these words of hers? In other passages

<sup>11</sup> I refer to Giorgio Agamben's philosophy. Agamben develops some crucial concepts of Heidegger's philosophy of language. Referring to a passage from Hegel's *Iena lessons*, Agamben explains that every animal, and thus even man, moaning in the agony of death, attains self-awareness. Therefore, for Agamben, to be aware and to express oneself through language paradoxically means to recall one own's past death, because human voice "is the voice of death. . . it is . . . vanishing and unattainable . . ." (47). In other words, language is expression of a sense of lack; language originates from an absence.

<sup>12</sup> Here Derrida refers to Husserl's philosophy. He underscores that, according to Husserl, the actual linguistic expression derives from a previous act of intentionality.

<sup>13</sup> De Certeau, define the mystical discourse as follows: "... il s'agit de paroles 'adressées', sans qu'on puisse savoir finalement par qui et à qui . . ." (195).

the Saint seemingly addresses someone, although she is actually talking to herself. For instance, in *colloquio* 32 Maria Maddalena apparently addresses Saint Catherine, but in reality she uses a conversational style to discuss with herself her private emotional states: "O Caterina, se tu fossi in terra tu sforzeresti Dio — O perché non sono io tale che lo possa sforzare io? — O cognitione mia, perché non se' tu capace di farne capace l'altre? Che volentieri me ne priverai" (1:320).

We could also think that the actual addressees of her words, and thus of her request, are her convent nuns, who witness all her visions. As the transcriptions of her raptures confirm, during her visions the Saint is aware of her sisters' presence.<sup>14</sup> In several cases Maria Maddalena involves her fellow nuns in what she is experiencing at that moment. For instance, in *colloquio* 48 she invites them to follow her toward Jesus' tomb and to mourn with her over His body. Moreover, in a vision contained in the second volume of *Probatione*, Maria Maddalena goes around in the convent asking her sisters if they possess love and if they know where love is.

Her convent sisters were able to listen to her actual voice, and thus they could better understand what the Saint meant by her words. Since the second, indirect message of every linguistic expression, as Searle reminds us, is in most cases conveyed by the specific tone of the speaker's voice, along with his facial expression and bodily posture, only her sisters would have been able to detect the Saint's full oral message. Indeed, the writers were aware of the crucial importance of her voice; it was in order to render a more vivid transcription of her oral discourses that they indicated in the text her silences and her exclamations. Let us take one of the many examples, a passage from *colloquio* 32, in which the nuns explain that they mark the Saint's silences and exclamations in order to stress her pauses: "... distendendosi a noi sì come si può vedere e comprendere in quelle parole che disse, le quali noi notamo il meglio che si potette, e le scriveremo qui sotto lasciando lo spatio dall'una all'altra perché si vegga quando stava cheta e quando parlava. . . ."<sup>15</sup>

We should not forget, however, that her convent sisters above all wanted her visions to be known and read. If the interlocutors, and thus the addressees of the

<sup>14</sup> This, of course, raises the fundamental question of authority in the text. Although Maria Maddalena is passive toward the divine call, she remains aware of those places in her convent where the divinity visits her. According to Dinzelsbacher's different categories of mystical encounters, one could say that Maria Maddalena's raptures are "in-between" visions, what the German scholar calls "Übergangsformen." By that term he means that the visionary's mind is not totally overwhelmed by the divine communication, but it is still able to distinguish human reality from the supernatural (Dinzelsbacher 37).

<sup>15</sup> *I Colloqui*, V. I, p. 319. At many other points, for instance in "colloquio" 35 (V. I, p. 362), the authors underscore the difficulty they have had in transcribing all the words pronounced by the Saint.

Saint's request, were only the divine presences who conversed with her and/or her sisters who witnessed her raptures, why were her words written down? It is crucial to understand that, as the above excerpt from Maria Maddalena's illusory dialogue with Saint Catherine has shown, in many cases the visionary does not talk to actual interlocutors; she rather creates them as imaginary listeners in order to express her feelings. The Saint's request, the ultimate sense of her discourse, is not directed at anybody in particular. As de Certeau reminds us, "[the mystical words are] 'adressées', sans qu'on puisse savoir finalement . . . à qui . . ." (195). The Saint talks because she feels disturbed. Thus, the sense of her request is clear: Maria Maddalena wants to share her pain; she asks for help. Whoever listens to her request is asked to help her in her task: to express fully God's word.

Nevertheless, Maria Maddalena's request has radically changed from its original formulation. In theory, we should say that the Saint has conveyed her message only through her voice, once and for all. Written language, the result of her sisters' transcriptions, is an imperfect substitute for her "voix vivante," as Derrida would call it (9).<sup>16</sup> The radical difference between oral and written discourse has been clearly formulated by Paul Ricoeur. He distinguishes between discourse as "event" (the "saying") and discourse as "meaning" (the "said"). Whereas the event-character of discourse is vanishing, its meaning-nature is everlasting. According to Ricoeur, although "all discourse is effectuated as an event . . . it is understood as meaning," because "writing is the full manifestation of discourse" (320-21). Ricoeur reminds us that, for thinkers such as Plato, Rousseau and Bergson, "language was also expression of passion. It was eloquence, not yet exegesis" (333). According to these philosophers, Ricoeur says, the written word severs its ties with the feeling, effort, and dynamism of thought. In any case, Ricoeur concludes, it is discourse as meaning which is transmitted from the writer to his reader.

Whereas Ricoeur's remarks are insightful as far as, for instance, fictive dialogues are concerned, they can not apprehend fully the uniqueness of such a work as *I colloqui*, since the French philosopher does not take into account that not every text has been originally conceived as a written product. Our text should first and foremost be read and interpreted as a discourse-event, for which the written form is only a faulty, albeit necessary, substitute. The Saint's fellow nuns are aware of the unbridgeable difference between the above two facets of Maria Maddalena's discourse. In several points throughout *I colloqui* they remark that their transcriptions cannot convey the whole meaning of the Saint's

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<sup>16</sup> In *Le parole dell'estasi* Pozzi compares the nuns' transcriptions to a musical score which reproduces a forever lost composition: "L'organismo smembrato, mummificato e forse mutilato che ci tramandano queste carte non si presta più a questo genere di auscultazione. Resta tuttavia leggibile di questa oralità ciò che la costituisce al di là di quel suono, come di una musica scritta di cui, perso il timbro e il ritmo, ci restino le frasi e gli accordi" (25).



visionary discourse. For instance, in "colloquio" 48, the nuns, shocked by the gravity of Maria Maddalena's voice, stop writing down her words. Their transcriptions, they note, will never be able to convey the imposing beauty of her voice: "Et cominciò a dire con tanta grandezza e tanto all'avviata che ci fu forza di fermar lo scrivere et starla a udire, pigliando solo il principio di qual cosa . . . se ben non mai potremo dire con quella grandezza e con quel bel modo che le diceva e proferiva lei . . ." (2:335-36).

Indeed, as far as the Saint's voice is concerned the whole *colloquio* 48 presents another fundamental problem. In this vision Maria Maddalena's voice acquires two different tones: a deep, masculine one (the Father's voice) and a humble, feminine one (her own voice). The Saint has finally succeeded in accomplishing her *unio mystica* with the Word in the form of a father-daughter conversation. However, we can neither listen to her double voice, nor perceive its mystical tone. The Saint cannot communicate her *unio mystica*. In fact, when the Saint actually succeeds in articulating God's word, her language fails to express her love experience. As she says in *colloquio* 39, which reports her mystical marriage to the Word, her union with God exceeds human language.<sup>17</sup> Although throughout *I colloqui* she strives to utter the Word by means of language, when she momentarily succeeds in doing it, she realizes that divine language and human language do not coincide. When she experiences a perfect union with the Word, one could say, her voice comes to modulate a different language, incomprehensible to us.

If we accept the above remarks about the impossibility of conveying the Saint's voice, one might conclude that the nuns' transcriptions were, to a certain degree, useless. The Saint's discourse, her voice, and thus also her request are irremediably lost, a basic assumption we find in Derrida's philosophy of language. For Derrida, written language is a defective substitute for oral expression; writing is even dangerous, because it could be mistaken for the spoken word (*De la grammatologie* 207-08). Derrida's remarks aim at rejecting the assumption that written language "completes," as Ricoeur claims, the meaning of oral discourse. He rather believes that writing distorts, so to speak, any oral expression. Derrida's notion can be useful to our interpretation of Maria Maddalena's words. As we have seen, the Saint's discourses formulate an inner request. However, the way in which she conveyed her message — the tone of her voice, her gestures, her movements — was and is irremediably lost.

Although Derrida's view can help illuminate a crucial problem of *I colloqui*, we should not forget that Maria Maddalena's sisters believed that her speeches had to be transcribed. They thought that her words, and thus also her request, could and had to be shared with those who had not actually listened to them. In this regard, Maria Maddalena's oral discourses are ultimately directed to all of us.

<sup>17</sup> *I Colloqui*, V. II, p. 25: ". . . non verbum, non parola, ma un vincolo d'anello, d'unione, d'amore, di pretiosità."

Indeed, in order to understand why the nuns decided to write down Maria Maddalena's words we must remember that, in her sisters' opinion, the transcriptions of her speeches belonged to the literary form of hagiography. Typically, a hagiographic text reported not only the extraordinary events of a Saint's life, but also some of his or her inspired words.<sup>18</sup> In the tradition of hagiographic texts the reported words acquired the same sacred value as a saint's relics, that is, they were seen as "remnants" of a saint's human experience.<sup>19</sup> But, what message, what request were a saint's recorded words supposed to convey to the reader? Concerning this issue, Edith Wyschogrod gives us a clear answer: "I define hagiography as a narrative linguistic practice that recounts the lives of saints so that the reader . . . can experience their imperative power" (6). A hagiography communicates, as Wyschogrod says, an imperative, moral request. The reader is supposed to compare his sinful life to that of the saint in question, so that he feels compelled to repent and change his life. Indeed, it is the author of the hagiography, not the saint, who formulates the request directed to the reader. Saints are usually depicted according to some commonplaces, which strip them of their personal identities. Every hagiographic text, we could conclude, formulates a similar request to readers.

Indeed, the authors of *I colloqui* began to write their text as a hagiography. In fact, the first chapters do not reproduce the Saint's whole speeches, but, according to this religious genre, only "remnants" of them. Given that the nuns could not hear what the Saint's interlocutors said to her, in the first *colloqui* the nuns felt free to invent, for instance, plausible dialogues between God and Maria Maddalena. A clear example of a reconstructed conversation between the Saint and the divinity is at the end of *colloquio* 4, when the nuns use expressions such as "in our opinion she answered Him . . . and He must have told her . . .": "Et in quello al solito fu tirata dal Signore, et gli diceva: 'Tu mi onori'. Et lei secondo noi gli doveva rispondere: 'Io vi vorrei onorare. . . .' Et gli dovette poi dire Gesù: 'Tu mi piaci tanto, perché cammini per via di timore e confidentia'" (1:90). In most of the first *colloqui*, however, the writers do not signal those passages that they have reconstructed.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, the passage from the fourteenth-century *Vita di Santa Chiara della Croce* in *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* (212). A major difference between the above passage and *I colloqui* is the language used in the text. Whereas Berengarius translates the Saint's words into a perfect Latin, in *I colloqui* the nuns do not modify the languages used by Maria Maddalena, both Latin and Italian.

<sup>19</sup> Walker Bynum studies how the Middle Ages treated the corpses of saints. The saints' bodies were dissected in several parts which were sent to different religious places, such as churches or convents. Those relics were believed to effect miracles because they belonged to the saints' immortal identity (265-97).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, *colloquio* 2, where the writers reconstruct a conversation between the Saint and God concerning the damned souls. According to the nuns, God seems almost to apologize to Maria Maddalena for sending the damned souls to hell: "Et che potevo io far più figliuola mia a

And yet, even though at the beginning her convent sisters had in mind a hagiographic work, they slowly transformed their text into something very different. Rather than a sequence of clichéd descriptions, the nuns' work turned into a two-volume monologue performed by the Saint herself. In *I colloqui* Maria Maddalena expresses herself, her concerns, her disquiet, and thus also her request, directed to all of us, for help and understanding. Her sisters attempted to transcribe the unrepeatable aspects of the Saint's oral discourse, that is, her silences, her exclamations, but also her brusque and anguished gestures and movements, when they realized that her discourse had two fundamental facets: on the one hand, the actual content of her words; on the other, the unique traits of her performances. The nuns understood that a possible reader of their hagiographic work would need to know not only the Saint's bare words, but also how she had uttered them.

As far as the content of her words is concerned, more so than by any specific content, Maria Maddalena is forced toward language by what de Certeau calls "le [mystique] vouloir dire" (233). The Saint's language, the actual content expressed by her voice, has thus an unmistakable figurative element. Indeed, in her speeches Maria Maddalena makes use of her personal, both cultural and religious, "mythèmes," that is, according to Lévi-Strauss, the smallest units of a mythic narration.<sup>21</sup> A myth, in its distinct units or "mythèmes," designates a pre-rational and thus pre-linguistic narration, which needs language to express itself, even though it is prior to language (Frank, *Mythos und Moderne* 17). Vico had already discussed this problem when he studied the so-called "poetic metaphysics."<sup>22</sup> *Mythèmes* are the essential element of language, for they give sense to every linguistic discourse. In her speeches Maria Maddalena refers to images from her personal mythology, that is, she uses those cultural and first of all religious sources that have molded her own identity. By making use of her own *mythèmes*, Maria Maddalena can formulate linguistically her pre-rational necessity for expression. Her *mythèmes* ultimately allow her to articulate linguistically her anguished request to her listeners/readers.

Which are Maria Maddalena's most frequent *mythèmes*? They revolve around

questa creatura? Et che può essa creatura più voler da me?" (1:66).

<sup>21</sup> In *What is neo-structuralism* Frank defines this concept as follows: "They [mythèmes] share with the 'constitutive units' of discourse the property that they are phrases, yet they are distinct from specifically literary texts in that they do not exhibit any style" (43).

<sup>22</sup> Vico, *La scienza nuova* 212-13. ("... poetic wisdom, the first wisdom of the gentile world, must have begun with a metaphysics not rational and abstract like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined as that of these first men must have been. ... this metaphysics was their poetry, a faculty born with them ... [which] made everything wonderful to men ... ." *The New Science of Giambattista* 74). In *De la grammatologie*, Derrida examines the important similarities between Vico's discourse and Rousseau's. Both thinkers, Derrida says, underscore that "the first language" was essentially figurative (Derrida 384).



the incarnated Word "il Verbo" in His human experience and death.<sup>23</sup> Their sources are both the Gospels and some medieval devotional manuals which recounted the Word's life and death, so that readers would remember all the pains the Savior had endured for them, and thus they would repent of their sins. The Saint's convent still possesses two copies of Maria Maddalena's very first reading: *Istruzione et avvertimenti per meditare la passione di Cristo nostro redentore, con alcune meditationi intorno ad esse* (Rome 1571), an Italian devotional text by Loarte.

The Saint's *mythèmes* first and foremost explore the Word's sufferings and death. Yet, in some parts of her visions, we cannot clearly perceive religious images, but only disturbed feelings, anguished states of mind. The Word's biography is present in her raptures as linguistic fragments or brief references, more than complete descriptions. The most frequent "mythic units" revolve around word-images such as "sanguè," "costato," "cinque piaghe," "fonte," "croce," "corona di spine," "cuore aperto" (Secondin 292-99). Maria Maddalena's discourses address the Word's sufferings, more than the Word Himself. One might say that her numerous visions, contained in several volumes, present variations of one basic mythic image: the Word suffering on the cross for all of humanity. Jesus, the Saint explains in *colloquio* 4, wants us to "practice" more pain than love, because, although love is sweeter, it is through pain that we become closer to Him and we are able to share His sufferings.<sup>24</sup> The primary source of language, Maria Maddalena tells us, is the Word's suffering. In fact, her anguish is twofold: it is founded both on her incapacity to express God's word and on her urge to evoke the Savior's pains. In the same *colloquio* 4 Maria Maddalena stresses the importance of bathing in the Word's blood, which comes out of His wounded chest. By bathing in His blood, the soul purifies and transforms itself into Him ("... il Sanguè adorna et doppo [l'anima] si trasforma tutta in Dio diventando un altro lui").<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the Saint's thematic

<sup>23</sup> Secondin tackles this aspect of the Saint's discourse (273).

<sup>24</sup> *Colloquio* 4 (1:88): "Gli piace ancora a Gesù che noi ci essercitiamo più nel dolore che nell'amore, perché esso dolore è come ire una spetie di martirio, e ci fa essercitare nel patire, e in questo modo vegniamo . . . a ricompensarlo di quello che ha patito per noi. Et con esso dolore possiamo compatirgli alle sue pene, e piangere e dolersi della sua Passione."

<sup>25</sup> (1:86). Following Levi-Strauss's theory on *mythèmes*, the anthropologist A. L. Becker states that there are two kinds of grammar. The first uses a set of strict rules followed by a certain group of speakers, while the second involves memory of previous texts: "There is another kind of grammar, based on a different perspective on language, one involving time and memory; or, in terms of contextual relations, a set of prior texts that one accumulates throughout one's lifetime, from simple social exchanges to long, semimemorized recitations. One learns these texts in action, by repetitions and corrections, starting with the simplest utterances of a baby. . . . We learn it [grammar] essentially by continual internal and external corrections, in response to change and lack of change in the environment. . . . the ways one shapes a text to new context include . . . rearrangements, repetition, expansion, inflexion, and embedding (138).

variations and/or interpretations of her linguistic history take a different form in each *colloquio*. From a literary standpoint, Maria Maddalena's discourse makes use of at least three basic forms. First, some of her speeches, often characterized by complex allegories and a dense syntax, have a clear sermonic tone, even when they are not structured as actual sermons (Pozzi 517-51). Second, her words present themselves as mere *reportage* of a visionary discourse. In this second case, the syntax and the coherence of her speeches is loose without being illogic. Third, her speech can also turn into a one-actress mystical play, in which the Saint identifies with several characters who witnessed the Word's sufferings.

Let us see now how the Saint varies one theme in the above three different ways. In several visions, Maria Maddalena talks about the crucial *mythème* of the Word's blood. In *colloquio* 5 she describes in detail the Savior's five bleeding wounds, and her soul's progress through contemplation of those wounds, in a well structured and powerful discourse:

Dico così . . . che prima nel piede sinistro il sangue annichilava e l'anima acquistava cognitione di sé. Nel piè destro il sangue purificava e l'anima si fortificava. Nella mano sinistra il sangue illuminava e l'anima acquistava la cognitione di Dio. Nella man destra il sangue illustrava e l'anima si edificava nella carità. El costato nutriva e l'anima si trasformava nel sangue, tanto che non intendeva poi altro che Sangue, non vedeva altro che sangue, non gustava altro che Sangue, non sentiva altro che Sangue, non pensava altro che di Sangue. . . .

(1:97)

In *colloquio* 33 the Saint reelaborates the above theme, indirectly referring to Saint Catherine's well-known insistence on Christ's blood.<sup>26</sup> The main difference from the above excerpt lies in the style of the Saint's discourse. Here Maria Maddalena expresses herself through broken sentences and brief exclamations:

Al *Verbum caro factum est* ci aggiugnerai: Sanguis unionis - - - et chi fece la prima faccia la seconda — el Sangue c'è — il calamaio è aperto, non tardare Agostino. . . . O Caterina, che eri tanto inebriata di questo sangue! — O, Giovanni lo fece noto al mondo, tu in parte l'hai fatto noto a me. . . .

(1:343)

In one of her final visions, *colloquio* 48, which has all of the characteristics of a miracle play, Maria Maddalena acts as the Virgin Mary who goes to her son's

<sup>26</sup> For instance, in a letter to her friend Raimondo from Capua Saint Catherine says: ". . . scrivo a voi . . . con desiderio di vedervi affocato e annegato in esso dolcissimo sangue suo [di Cristo], il quale sangue è intriso con fuoco dell'ardentissima carità sua. Questo desidera l'anima mia, cioè vedervi in esso sangue . . ." (Pozzi-Leonardi 228-29).

tomb. The theme of the Word's blood is here seen from His mother's perspective:

Di nuovo, o eterno Padre, ti offerisco il suo Sangue per l'humano genere. . .  
 . O figliuolo mio, sapevo sì quando t'avevo nel ventre che ti avevo a vedere  
 a questo modo, ma, ah ah ah! . . . Io ti nutrivò di latte, e tu vuoi nutrire tutti  
 di sangue. O quanto volentieri harei dato il mio in unione del tuo. . .

(2:289)

However, Maria Maddalena had repeated visions of the Word's passion: among others, in *colloqui* 2, 5, 21 and 36. In a later vision, contained in the manuscript edited with the name *Probatione* the Saint once again experiences the Savior's passion and death.

I shall try now to answer a crucial question that arises from Maria Maddalena's text: What relationship do we, as readers, have with the Saint's lost voice? Ricoeur would answer that the act of writing them down "completes" the sense of her speeches. In other words, we should not worry about the Saint's specific linguistic performances; the tone of her voice, her pauses, her exclamations, her sighs, the changing speed of her pronunciation are lost forever. In fact, scholars study exclusively the content of her speeches, without considering the specific ways in which the Saint pronounced her words. However, we should not forget that her convent sisters perceived the importance of her actual voice. They slowly modified their transcriptions according to the Saint's linguistic performances. Instead of inventing plausible dialogues between the Saint and her divine interlocutors, after *colloquio* 24 her convent transcribers limited themselves to marking down her silences and exclamations.

To understand our relationship with Saint's spoken discourse, one must remember the basic premise of this essay: Maria Maddalena's words express her anguish and thus her request to whoever listens to her speech. Maria Maddalena wants us to share her anguish and to help her in her task, the expression of the Word. However, in order to respond to the Saint's request, we, the readers, must be able to perceive her voice. Her request to us lies both in the actual content of her words and in her unique voice; the two levels of her discourse, as "meaning" and as "event," merge in order to express her request. Indeed, as God asks Maria Maddalena to evoke His Word, the Saint asks us to perceive her own voice. By attempting to perceive her voice, we also attempt to understand the sense of her request, since the Saint directs her words to every listener/reader. Indeed, this is the intrinsic meaning of this text: it asks the reader to perceive and respond to the Saint's request.

Since her fellow nuns' transcription is all we have of the Saint's oral discourse, it is only through our reading that we can approach her voice. "Reading," says Ricoeur, "is the pharmakon, the 'remedy,' by which the meaning of the text is 'rescued' from the enstrangement of distancing and put



in a new proximity . . ." (337). However, the meaning of *I colloqui* implies both the mere content of the Saint's discourse and the unique aspects of her utterance, such as tone of voice, pauses and exclamations. The writers specifically want us to take into account the way in which the Saint formulated her discourse. *I colloqui*, one might say, requires a very specific reading.

As we have seen at the beginning of this paper, the divinity asks her to utter His Word, that is, His being. Maria Maddalena says something because she cannot help but respond to God's request. The reader is asked not only to follow the development of the plot of her rapture, if there is any, but first and foremost to listen to her anguished voice. In other words, the reader is invited to go back to the very source of the transcribed text, the actual voice of Maria Maddalena.

To do so, we must take into account all those linguistic signs the nuns scattered throughout their transcriptions. In fact, to indicate Maria Maddalena's linguistic performance, the nuns primarily mark two major elements of her oral discourse: her silences and her exclamations. And yet, these two elements can only hint at the Saint's inner state of mind, for they cannot directly reproduce her feelings. What the nuns' transcriptions communicate to the reader is thus a lack; by reading the Saint's reported silences and exclamations we discern a fundamental absence. Indeed, the nuns' attempt to reproduce the oral level of her discourse makes us perceive Maria Maddalena's voice as an absence. This awareness is a crucial point of my interpretation in this mystical work. Unlike other texts — either mystical or fictional — *I colloqui* calls our attention to its lost orality. Although the Saint's urge to expression, conveyed through her spoken words, is irremediably lost, we can nevertheless interpret the "remnants" of her oral discourse. Just as God, the Word, asks the Saint to be uttered, we are asked to capture her lost voice. However, in our attempt to awaken the oral level of her discourse we might realize that Maria Maddalena's request and her disquiet are analogous to our own. The Saint's frustration at being unable to evoke God's Word is not dissimilar from our own incapacity to perceive the Saint's voice and inner state. Reading *I colloqui* can ultimately lead us toward a deeper awareness of our own identity. As Agamben says, at the origin of any linguistic expression paradoxically lies a sense of lack: Maria Maddalena starts speaking because she feels incapable of summoning up divine Word; likewise, we feel urged to comment on *I colloqui* when we realize that her disquiet and frustration, similar to our own disquiet and frustration, cannot be evoked through language and thus cannot be shared with others.<sup>27</sup> In other words, by reading *I colloqui* we may be able to understand better our own use of language. Rather than actually communicating facts and feelings, human language springs from our perception that our being "here and now" is based on a fundamental absence. Maria Maddalena knew that her sisters' *reportage* would not save her from inner despair regarding language; the Saint knew that spoken language exists only in the

<sup>27</sup> See note 19 about Agamben's *Language and Death, the Place of Negativity*.

moment it is expressed. As Agamben says, spoken language plays the same role as that of a moan. *I colloqui* ultimately makes us, the readers, better perceive that through this mystical text we might contact with our own fundamental non-being, the primary source of language.

Let us analyze in detail how the Saint's sisters transcribed two major aspects of her oral discourse: her exclamations and her silences. As far as her exclamations are concerned, it is important to notice that the nuns vary the way they report them. The most frequent sign used to mark her exclamations is "o": "O, o, o, — o bonitas. . . O morte che dai vita — Io muoio vivendo — O, o, o, — Appone iniquitatem super iniquitatem — U, che tanto poco sia intesa. La sapienza par pazzia, et pazzia la sapienza — O iniquità! . . . O, o, o, bone Jesu" (2:15). We cannot say, for instance, if the capital "O" has a slight different meaning from "o." Moreover, we cannot know how the Saint actually pronounced the three *o*'s in a row. Were they uttered in the same way all the three times? In the above passage we also have another, albeit less frequent, exclamation: "u." Is this "u" similar to that present in the expression from *colloquio* 46: "U, veramente sei quello che sei . . .?" (2:246). A third kind of expression used to mark the Saint's exclamations is "e": "O bambolin mio, e be' piedini, e' e' — O, o poverino — O sposo, ti vorrei baciare . . . e, e, e, s'è formato quelli orecchini per poterci udire . . ." (2:182).<sup>28</sup> Some of the most striking passages of the whole texts are almost interely based on exclamations. In *colloquio* 48 the saint repeats "O bone Jesu!" several times:

O bone Jesu! — Omnes vos qui transit per viam, attendite e videte si est dolor sicut dolor meus — O bone Jesu! — O bone Jesu! — O Jesu mio, l'ho chiaro, sì — Si ascenderò in celum tu illic es, si descenderò in infernum ades — O bone Jesu! — sei tutto amore, ma sei tutto puro — O verbo, quando verrai tu? — O bone Jesu! Jesu mio, voi volete, sì, sì — Bone Jesu, bone Jesu — non intendo né te né me. Se io sono in te, tu lo sai, tu di te n'esci — se io sono in terra non so, se io sono in cielo tu lo sai. . .

(2:312)

It is of course impossible to ascertain if the above exclamations were uttered all in the same way. Nor is it possible to determine the temporal gap between two similar exclamations. By transcribing her exclamations, the nuns allude to the Saint's suffering without being able to describe it. Although we cannot come in contact with Maria Maddalena's emotional state, we sense that the goal of this excerpt is the communication of a private sorrow.

To clarify this important point concerning the impossible communication of a private feeling by means of language, I quote a passage from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigation*:

<sup>28</sup> I believe that the letter "e" and "e'" have two different meanings. In this excerpt "e" is a mere conjunction, whereas "e'" is an exclamation (*eh*).

Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a "beetle." No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says that he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something quite different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. But suppose the word "beetle" had a use in these people's language? If so it would not be used as the name of a thing.

(Hunter 98)

In this passage Wittgenstein denies that a so-called private object can ever exist. In fact, Wittgenstein claims, if we hypothesize that we can only know from our own case "what a beetle is," we can never be sure that our "beetle" coincides with someone else's "beetle." The term "beetle" points to something, but we cannot determine what this something is or whether it really exists. Beyond the metaphor, Wittgenstein believes that we cannot know something only out of our private experience; reality can only be shared through a common use of language. What cannot be shared through language cannot be said necessarily to exist. Therefore, given that, according to Wittgenstein, we cannot communicate private pain or joy, we might say that these sensations are indefinable. One's interpretation of the word "pain," as one connects it to one's personal experiences, can never totally correspond to someone else's "pain" (Wittgenstein 82).

The nuns' transcriptions of the Saint's exclamations seek to render her pains without being able to describe them. However, the nuns' efforts remind us of the Saint's pain and thus of her implied request to us. By breaking the traditional syntax of Italian prose, Maria Maddalena's frequent and short exclamations divert our attention away from the mere content of her discourse to its implicit message: her despair and her consequent request for help directed to all her listeners/readers. Although we cannot know how the Saint actually pronounced it, the continuous exclamation "O bone Jesu!," for instance, helps us perceive that the sense of her speech does not totally lie in the meaning of her words. Her discourse, based on repeated exclamations, hints at something that is before language: her anguished drive toward expression.

The other essential element of the Saint's discourse are her silences. Even more than her exclamations, the Saint's silences help us approach the meaning of her words and thus also of her request. We cannot passively read her speeches without taking into account her frequent pauses. *I colloqui* asks us to "complete" her discourse by perceiving the sense of her silences. As the linguist Deborah Tannen points out, in every linguistic interaction silence "is the extreme manifestation of indirectness . . . ; [silence] can be a matter of saying nothing and meaning something" (*Perspective on Silence* 97). Silence's indirectness, however, "contributes to a sense of involvement through mutual participation in sensemaking" (*Talking Voice* 23). If we apply Tannen's remarks to *I colloqui*,



we could say that the Saint's silences ask us, the readers, to "make sense" of her utterances. The act of "making sense" is shared by the speaker, the Saint, her listeners, sisters, and readers.

Through the Saint's silences, we understand that the actual meaning of the text "is hidden," so to speak, beneath her words. Indeed, Maria Maddalena's discourse does not have a rationally programmed structure, since her speeches evolve according to her inner emotional impulses. However, to say that her emotions dictate the development of her discourse does not mean that her speeches are illogical. The logic of *I colloqui* lies in the Saint's emotional states and in her anguished request. Therefore, by considering her silences, we come closer to Maria Maddalena's necessity for expression. Her silences help us focus on her anguished voice and thus also on her request to us.

In *I colloqui* silence is multi-faceted: 1) it can refer to the unheard words of one of her interlocutors, in particular the Word (Lorenz 48);<sup>29</sup> 2) it can represent a pause in her meditations, as if the Saint were developing some unexpressed thoughts; 3) it can mark a sudden and overwhelming sense of despair, which often follows an exclamation. As the following excerpts will clearly show, the different types of silence very often merge in the Saint's discourse. However, we can find passages in which one of them dominates over the others.

In some passages of the text Maria Maddalena clearly responds to an unheard interlocutor. She keeps silent because someone is talking to her. We read her silences, one could say, as if they implicitly contained the other's voice. One could say that her silences are thus implicitly expressive. We could even imagine single words or full sentences that her interlocutors might say to her, like in a telephone conversation of which we hear only half. In a sense, we participate in the Saint's dialogues in that we necessarily attempt to complete them. For instance, in a passage from *colloquio* 39 in which Maria Maddalena is mystically married to the Word, while she is describing her wedding ring, she enters into a brief conversation with the divinity: " — Alla prima e alla seconda, aggiugni la terza — Et che sarà? — Ma Jesu mio, io non ti vuò dar legge — O la purità! . . ." (2:18). When we read this passage we cannot avoid a sense of frustration because we cannot know what the divinity has told her. We know for sure that in her silences lies the Word's voice; her silences allude to His spoken words. When Maria Maddalena keeps quiet, her silence allow the divinity to express Himself; through her silence the divinity manifests Himself, as "negative theology" states. Maria Maddalena's silences *are* the divinity Himself.

In another passage in *colloquio* 44 Maria Maddalena talks with God about her forthcoming fight with the demons. Her battle against them will last three days, the same length of time as the Word's passion:

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<sup>29</sup> Lorenz believes that silence has a referential function, what Peirce calls "index." Silence, says Lorenz, refers to something which cannot be represented or described.

O Padre, O Verbo, o Spirito Santo — Non intendo poi altro. Come dire: tu mi mostri queste cose di te, e io poi non l'intendo — Tu conosci le forze meglio di me — Sì, passata esta notte con brevità — Ancor tre notte, eh? — O quella passata non è in numero, eh? — in te Domine speravi non confundar in eternum —

(2:135)

The reader overhears, one could say, the above dialogue without perceiving the voice of one of the speakers. In other passages the Saint asks her interlocutors to raise their voices, because she cannot hear them well. For example, in *colloquio* 46: "Inalzate la voce — Non intendo — Non so che — O sì sì, ma sento questa voce, e poi non intendo quel che diciate . . ." (2:235). Elsewhere, Maria Maddalena hears the devils scream at her: "Ululate, gridate quanto volete, sù, voi accrescete pur pena anche a voi — Et anche qui non mi piglierete, so che io son creata di terra e ho a essere cibo de' vermini . . ." (2:106). Finally, in some extraordinary passages her silences even help us to imagine her physical interaction with her interlocutors. For example, in *colloquio* 43 Maria Maddalena asks Jesus to defend her against the devils who come back to attack her:

O Verbo, dammi aiuto, e' ritornano — Verbum caro factum est — O Verbo, mandagli un po' via — Sursum corda — che ne cavi tu? — O sciocchi e ignoranti, che credete voi fare? Fate alfine male a voi! — O non vedi tu che gli altri se ne sono iti? Et tu sei tanto ardito che ti fai innanzi, non vedi che c'è il mio Verbo che mi difende? — Va, va! . . .

(2:100)

In the above passage the Saint's silences not only allude to the devil's responses, they also help us "see" the overall image of the Saint fighting with her enemy. Her silences, we could infer, ask us to participate actively in the text.

More often, however, the Saint's silences do not allude to an unheard speaker; they are pauses in her private train of thought. In *colloquio* 32, for instance, Maria Maddalena speaks about being a nun. In particular, she states that "they," probably referring both to her sisters and to herself, are ungrateful to the Word, because they do not remember all the pains He suffered for them and the constant help He gave to their souls:

La mia piccolezza non capisce d'essere beata, dolorosa, penosa, laboriosa e gloriosa — O, noi facciamo proprio come quelli — o, noi paghiamo bene quello che fa per noi, ma non noi stessi — Ego sum vermis et non homo. Inscrutabile patisce, anzi, anzi sopporta tanta ingratitudine — fa che tanta cooperatione sia comunicata a tutti — O chi sarà, chi sarà, chi sarà capace di tanta cooperatione che fai con l'anima, col Padre, e con lo Spirito Santo? — Io non lo capisco — O Paulo, o Paulo, se non havessi mai scritto, né detto altro, haresti detto la verità, che non può ascendere nel cuor dell'huomo. . . .

(1:319-320)

In this passage the Saint's words spring from her pauses (Merleau-Ponti 43). She develops her thought in a complete silence; her utterances are the debris of her internal thinking. If we try to grasp their overall meaning, we could say that in the above excerpt Maria Maddalena slowly becomes aware of insensitivity toward the Word's generosity and His desire to collaborate with the soul. Indeed, her silences refer to an increasing sense of guilt: "La mia piccolezza non capisce d'essere beata, dolorosa, penosa, laboriosa e gloriosa — O, noi facciamo proprio come quelli — o, noi paghiamo bene quello che fa per noi, ma non noi stessi." As her anguish apparently increases, the Saint directly addresses the Word, even though we cannot tell whether she actually talks to Him: "O chi sarà, chi sarà, chi sarà capace di tanta cooperazione che fai con l'anima, col Padre, e con lo Spirito Santo? — Io non lo capisco —." If we "listen to" her speaking, we perceive that a state of deep disquiet dominates her words. Her anguish seeps, one could say, through her silences. At the end of the above passage Maria Maddalena changes interlocutor. Now she seems to direct her words to Saint Paul. Also in this case we cannot establish whether she actually sees Paul and talks to him. It may be that she rather invokes her different interlocutors, without actually exchanging words with them.

In another excerpt containing Maria Maddalena's silences from colloquio 39, the Saint does not develop a specific chain of thoughts; she rather gives rein to her despair. Her short sentences are mere exclamations:

O bone Jesu, quantu tu vuoi — O, i non lo so — et relaxabo me in liberalitate tua — o bone Jesu — O, o, o, — O Verbo, o bone Jesu — O bonitas immensa — Vir linguosus non dirigitur in terra — o non molto manco delle bestiemme — O bone veritas, tu dai le forze, ancor che impossibile paia alla'anima e insieme al corpo.

(2:14)

If we merely read her words without considering her silences, we would fail to perceive her hidden despair. When she simply expresses her feelings through broken utterances, the Saint is overwhelmed by despair, she is unable to articulate a thought.

We have seen how the Saint's silences make us, the readers, aware that there is a deep meaning of her discourse and that her pauses help us consider not only her interlocutors' responses, but they also help us "see" the scene of their encounter with the Saint. More importantly, her silences draw our attention to her unexpressed feelings and to their silent development in her mind. Through her silences we come closer, one could say, to her own pains.

I would like to conclude by reporting a short vision entirely dominated by the Saint's silence. In *Revelatione e Intelligentie*, a transcription of her later raptures, Maria Maddalena's sisters state that one day the Saint kept silent throughout her vision:



. . . ritornò in ratto la diletta anima al solito suo circa hore undici, nel qual ratto non parlò punto, ma si vedde che pativa, stando molto mesta e ammirata eccetto su quell'hora che era solita l'altre mattine ricever lo Spirito Santo, che si rallegrò e con segni mostrò di riceverlo. Et doppio alquanto si ritornò in quella medesima mestitia e patire che faceva prima, stando così come di sopra è detto sino alla sera alle 23 hora. . .

(175)

What the nuns can notice are only her physical expressions: her face is tense and she seems to be suffering. Later, she looks relieved. Her silences are all we have with which to interpret her vision. Her sisters believe that her sudden joy is due to her usual encounter with the Holy Spirit. Whereas in other raptures her recurrent pauses help us apprehend the meaning of her words, in this vision her complete silence denies our participation in the text.

Since her pauses, even more than her exclamations, are the only "remnants" of her linguistic performance, the Saint's silences can either improve or deny our understanding of her visionary discourses. It is only through her silences that we "listen to" her absent voice. In fact, our reading of *I colloqui* can be assumed to go through a three-step phase. During our first reading of her speech we tend to pay greater attention to her words than to her pauses, in order to grasp the overall sense of her discourse. Then we try to understand how her words merge with her silences. In other words, we want to respond to the question: Why did she keep silent in that specific moment of her discourse? Finally, we perceive that her silences both reveal and hide the deep meaning of her words. In this final phase we direct all our attention to her silences. This process of understanding corresponds to Husserl's theory of *epoché*. Husserl believes that, in its act of focusing, human consciousness never apprehends reality as a static entity. In fact, human perception changes continuously (117). In order to transcend reality's changeable phenomena, consciousness has to perform an act of "abstention," the so-called *epoché*. In the act of apprehending reality, the subject must refrain from any judgment, that is, he must "bracket" any judgment concerning spatio-temporal existence (98-99). In other words, the subject abstains from interpreting the object apprehended in order to pass intuitively from an immanent to a transcendental intuition of reality. Let us restate the above three-step phase of our interpretation of *I colloqui* by using Husserl's terminology. When we pass from considering her words in themselves to their relationship with her pauses, we "bracket" the Saint's words, that is, we abstain from judging them. The Saint's silences make us suspend our judgment about her discourse. Later, when we begin listening to her silences, we may begin to perceive the transcendental meaning of her words.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, we perform our act of

<sup>30</sup> According to Volli (17), language is fundamentally empty. Silence is our perception of

interpretation in silence. It is silence that allows us both to approach her text and formulate our own judgment of its meanings.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the inner sense of *I colloqui* lies in the Saint's silences, exclamations, and gestures. Rather than formulating a rational interpretation of her discourses, we keep silent and listen to her pauses. Keeping silent, we may perceive her request. The Saint strives to pronounce God's Word; she asks us to share her attempt. Her visions actually start when she is shaken by a biblical quotation or even by a single word, such as "blood" or "Word." She does not care about her sisters' transcriptions, since her discourse "lives" only in its orality.

Maria Maddalena's request to her audience is conveyed through the absence of voice. We must "complete" this mystical work, as Ingarden or Iser would say, by perceiving a fundamental absence: that of the visionary's voice. Indeed, our imagination cannot fill this "gap" in a positive way by imagining her voice. It is actually through her absent voice, however, that the Saint can still speak to us. The impossibility of evoking her voice, I argue, corresponds to her difficulty to summon up God's Word. Her sense of frustration is ours: language cannot convey being; language expresses an absence. We ultimately fill in the gap of her lost, absent voice with our own disquiet. We too become aware of ourselves, as Agamben stresses, when we perceive our own absence. Seen in this way, *I colloqui* is not a book simply to read, but rather a book to experience.

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language's emptiness: "L'opposto del rumore. . . è il silenzio, quel vuoto che dentro il linguaggio delimita e permette di stabilire le differenze o far riecheggiare il senso. . . ."

<sup>31</sup> I refer to Rovatti's interpretation of Husserl's *epoché* (35). Rovatti holds that Husserl's phenomenological suspension should be seen as an act conveying silence, rather than conveying logos: "L'epoché . . . introduce un arresto, un tempo di attesa, una pausa. L'alterità che il fenomeno in quanto tale rivela è connessa a uno slittamento dell'attività alla passività, dal guardare all'ascoltare. L'ipotesi che sto cercando di mettere alla prova è che la sospensione fenomenologica sia interpretabile come silenzio. . . ." Valesio tackles this problem from a literary standpoint. He underscores that silence allows the reader to interpret the text. It is only by listening in silence that the critic comes to understand the text: "L'ascolto è qui considerato . . . non semplicemente come un turno di silenzio dentro un dialogo dunque un'alternativa temporanea e meccanica al parlare ma come il coronamento dell'attività del dire. . . . L'unico modo di veramente realizzare il paradosso del silenzio se vogliamo . . . continuare a fare retorica, critica letteraria . . . è quello di assumere la posizione . . . dell'ascoltatore" (400).

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**Karen-edis Barzman**

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**Cultural Production, Religious Devotion,  
and Subjectivity in Early Modern Italy:  
The Case Study of Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi\***

In 1583, at the age of seventeen, Caterina de' Pazzi (1576-1607, canonized 1669) entered a Carmelite convent in Florence, making her profession and assuming the name Maria Maddalena ("Mary Magdalen"). Three weeks later the sisters found her running from room to room, clutching a small crucifix and speaking vehemently about the sacrifice of Jesus. She detached the carved body from the wooden cross and gazed at the wounds in the figure's hands, side, and feet, admonishing the sisters for their laxity and preaching about the observance of religious vows. Refusing water after hours of speech, she put her mouth to the right hand of the carved figure, swallowing as though she were drinking from his wound (Pazzi 1: 50-61). In 1587, the sisters found her in rapture with a clay doll of the Virgin Mary in her arms. "And with this doll," they wrote, "she performed many beautiful gestures and actions," speaking about the efficacy of the veneration of Mary (Pazzi 4: 267). Five years later she climbed up to the cornice of the sisters' choir, removing a life-sized figure of Jesus from a cross mounted on the wall. She lowered the figure to the floor and removed the crown of thorns from its head, intoning a hymn in which the sisters spontaneously joined. They fell in line behind her, following her throughout the building and garden as she cradled the sculpture in her arms — like Mary, they claimed, in a *Pietà*. She spoke for hours on this occasion about salvation and the sacrifice of Jesus, according to the sisters, as if in colloquy with God (Pazzi 5: 203-07).

Female religious provide a convenient point of entry into the subject-matter at hand: women, piety, and cultural production in early modern Italy. This essay

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does not treat female “artists” per se, that is, women as producers of paintings, drawings, embroidery and the like, although many religious engaged in the manufacture of images and objects that were inspired by devotion. Some, particularly female mystics, made works at the behest of their confessors, providing pictorial texts as a basis for the interrogation of the orthodoxy of their visions and their faith. Others engaged in unsolicited production. Caterina de’ Ricci (1523-1590, canonized 1746) painted a little *Man of sorrows* as a gift for Charles Borromeo, the Catholic Reformation Bishop of Milan, who kept it by his bed; the painting apparently does not survive (Vecchi and Grigioni 12-13). Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi painted and embroidered in rapture, with her eyes covered or in complete darkness — to which the Carmelite sisters testified as miracles during the process of her beatification (Saggi 237-38). Drawings and paintings of her blindfolded and deftly wielding a brush must have served to secure her identification as a divinely inspired “artist” in the collective imagination of seventeenth-century Florentines [Fig. 1]. Nonetheless, art historians are not able to identify paintings by her hand, and the paucity of works by other women in the period underscores the problems faced by scholars interested in women and artistic production in early modern Italy.

The narrative accounts at the beginning of this essay are extracted from transcriptions of Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi’s speech at the moment of its utterance — that is, from the texts most closely associated with her life and embodied experience. At the direction of their confessors, teams of Carmelites simultaneously recorded as much of the mystic’s discourse as time and the conditions of reception would allow and interpreted her gestures, filling seven volumes over the years with her exegesis of scripture and preaching about religious reform. Granting their mediation of the subject (which is a function of all texts), these transcriptions suggest the rich possibilities of the study of women and reception (as opposed to women and “artistic” production) in the period. Indeed, the degree of this woman’s physical engagement with devotional objects (much higher than historians of art generally imply) indicates the need to re-evaluate the status of sacred “art” and representations, and their place in the lives of women in early modern Italy.<sup>1</sup>

This notwithstanding, I have decided here to take a different approach to the material. This essay constitutes an attempt to broaden the discussion of women

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<sup>1</sup> For recent works that take up the function of and/or response to sacred images and objects, see Belting; Freedberg; and Os. On Italy in particular, see Paoletti (in notes 1, 6, and 41, he cites work by other Italianists on the subject, including that of historians of drama who address the use of carved effigies in the context of religious plays). As is true of some of the art historians cited above, I am interested primarily in non-liturgical contexts within which devotional objects and images were taken up by the faithful, although I focus on women. See, for example, the work of the social historian Klapisch-Zuber, including “Holy Dolls: Play and Piety in Florence in the Quattrocento.”

and cultural production. It takes as its focus not the material culture that typically falls within the purview of art history, but rather the signifying practices through which performative subjects themselves enter visual and textual culture. In this context, the essay also attempts to recuperate agency, or theories of the self, in discussions of representation, while refusing notions of essential or authentic subjectivity. This kind of critical return to agency raises questions about the epistemological status of representation (what is its relation to "reality" or "truth"?) as well as the possibilities of subjecthood and the politics of identity. For example, does a coherent, rational, self-present subject exist outside of (and express itself *with*) language and other forms of representation? Or, is the subject actually constituted *in* and *through* language, gesture, and other forms of cultural signification that include practices such as painting, embroidery, mystical devotion, and penitence — cultural practices that themselves comprise elaborate, performed representations within which the subject takes on recognizable form? After raising these questions, the essay concludes with an invitation to rethink "production" and "reception" outside the terms of art history. The discipline typically casts these activities as discrete and mutually exclusive categories of human practice. Yet in discussing the performance of the self (the latter, a process within which individuals continually effect their own cultural inscription), the distinctions between production and reception collapse. What is often taken as subjective expression, I will argue, actually constitutes a re-presentation of received (and necessarily recognizable) categories of identity, as when the female religious fashions her self as "mystic," and the mystic likewise performs as "the Magdalen" or "the Virgin Mary."

The Carmelite and mystic Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi provides a useful case study in this line of inquiry. Her "ecstasies" formed part of a pattern of activity by means of which she became the focal point of spectacle, commanding an audience of listeners, viewers, and those moved to participate for over twenty years. The effect of elaborate forms of representation based on received models, despite the appearance of spontaneity, the ecstasies serve as examples of myriad acts that comprise the semiotic self — a spectacular, citational self who performs social representations already constituted to a certain degree prior to each and every rehearsal. Within the walls of an institution that sanctioned silence, Caterina de' Pazzi spoke in the name of Mary Magdalen; she gestured like the Virgin Mary. Performing a self in "a place that oscillates between ritual and theatre," she moved within an "onomastic grid" and a social frame of reference that the culture offered her (Certeau 261-64). Indeed theatre is literally what I mean here, for carved effigies were frequently used in religious plays and feastday celebrations, while figures of Jesus were often detached from the cross and used as centerpieces in re-enactments of the Deposition and the Lamentation on Good Friday.<sup>2</sup> Thus even Maria Maddalena's use of sculpture in the episodes

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<sup>2</sup> See Paoletti for an overview of this subject and bibliographic references.

described above had its analogue in what was simply a more highly codified form of public performance (liturgical drama) with which she must have been familiar. It was within a given “network of symbolization,” then, in the words of Michel de Certeau, that she and her contemporaries would have experienced their own subjectivity and that of others (Certeau 264). And, I will argue, it is because of the inherent instability of signification in this context that the inherited frame of reference turns into a potential site for subjective manoeuvring — even within normative roles.

The Florentine mystic Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi died at the age of forty in 1607, having passed her adult life in a cloistered convent. The year 1669 marked her canonization and the beginning of a campaign to deploy her image in official forms of representation. Painters and sculptors depicted her mystical encounters with Jesus and Mary as well as miracles approved at the time of her canonization. Elsewhere I have discussed this authorized imagery, which was produced posthumously to celebrate the mystic’s sainthood (Barzman). It conforms to normative hagiographical models, omitting the discourse of reform given so clearly in the transcriptions of Maria Maddalena’s speech. Here I want to focus on this unauthorized discourse, on this woman’s acts of self-representation involving speech and pantomime with sacred objects, several examples of which I discussed at the outset. This complex form of self-representation began after she assumed the name “Mary Magdalen.” How did this name signify?

Like all signs, “Mary Magdalen” had the potential for multiple meanings within the mystic’s social world. The most common associations, “sinner” and “penitent,” had their origins in the canonical Gospels — in Luke 7:37-50, where a female sinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee washes Jesus’s feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and anoints them with oil. By the time of Gregory the Great at the turn of the seventh century, the Church Fathers had already associated the sins of the woman in this passage with prostitution (based in part on an ambiguous phrase in Luke 7:47, “. . . for she loved much”); moreover, they had linked her with “Mary Magdalen,” a name that appears fourteen times in other narrative contexts in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (Malvern 16-29, 55). Thus the Magdalen acquired the valence of “whore,” although the early sources do not *name* her as such. Her association with penitence also originates in scripture, although, again, not in passages that identify her by name. The sins for which she repented multiply over the centuries to include luxury, avarice, and lust — the last confused by writers (from theologians to poets) with prostitution, which, rather than homologous with lust, is a business arrangement comprising the exchange of sex for money or payment in kind. In the late medieval and early modern periods sermons, passion plays, and other forms of cultural production in addition to painting, sculpture, and the print media reinforced the identification of the Magdalen as “whore” and “penitent” at the level of popular Christian thought.



Examples of the Magdalen as prostitute include Francesco Morandini's Florentine painting of *circa* 1580 [Fig. 2], in which the ointment jar in the figure's hands (the saint's most common attribute, alluding to her anointing of Jesus) secures her identification. Some have identified the subject of this painting as *A Portrait of a Woman with the Attributes of the Magdalen* (Mosco 76-78). The full profile of the face, however, together with the generic, idealized features, and the elaborate coiffure and headdress, evoke the *teste divine* or "divine heads" made famous by Michelangelo earlier in the century and still popular in Florence as a type in the second half of the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the excessive rouging of the cheek, the sheer garment through which the nipples protrude, and the jewels and pearls that stud the fabric mark the figure as "ideal courtesan" in a city where authorities had repeatedly promulgated sumptuary laws in an attempt to regulate dress and adornment for men and women according to elaborate social codes (Hughes). Contemporary paintings of Florentine women of high social standing typically included heavy, brocaded or textured garments which conceal the sitters' sexed anatomy. Moreover, the garments in the portraits display a more restrained use of jewels as ornamentation — for example, in Alessandro Allori's double *Portrait of a Noblewoman and her Son* of 1574 [Fig. 3].<sup>4</sup> Even in Agnolo Bronzino's double *Portrait of Eleanora of Toledo and her Son* of *circa* 1545 [Fig. 4], the prototype for Allori's painting depicting the woman of highest rank in mid-sixteenth-century Florence (the wife of the Medici Duke, Cosimo I), the use of pearls and stones is much more discreet. It seems unlikely that a Florentine woman of noble birth or marriage around 1580 would have dressed in this fashion or chosen to have herself represented as a woman of questionable virtue. The painting is uncompromising in its coding of the Magdalen as "courtesan," with the only reminder of her piety and virtue (the ointment jar) relegated to the periphery, in the lower right-hand corner.

Pietro Aretino both reflected and reinforced prevailing associations of the Magdalen with prostitution in his *Sei giornate* or *Ragionamento* of 1534, a comic dialogue about three estates of womanhood — prostitutes, nuns, and married women — in which a courtesan identifies the Magdalen as the patron saint of her profession; "... oggi è la Madalena nostra avvocata che non si fa niente" ("... today is the feastday of Magdalen, our patron saint, and we do not work"; Aretino 11). The joke implicit in this assertion depends on the knowledge that religious houses for penitent prostitutes and "fallen women," which sprang up throughout Europe in the period, also invariably designated the Magdalen as their patron saint. Scores of such houses existed in Italy alone by the mid-sixteenth century (Cohen 18). It might seem a contradiction that the Magdalen could serve as advocate and protectress of both courtesans and

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Iacopo Ligozzi's profile drawing from the late sixteenth century (in the tradition of the *teste divine*), reproduced in Feinberg 110-11.

<sup>4</sup> On Allori's double portrait, see Wollesen-Wisch 48-53.

*convertite*. In fact, “prostitute” and “penitent” operated within a signifying structure *as paired opposites* in early modern Europe. As with all signs, the signification of each depended on their antitheses (or, on that which they are not, within historically determined codes), which, despite their absence, always lurk behind them in any given representation.<sup>5</sup> I have already pointed out the double valence of “Mary Magdalen” in the prevailing codes of the period. Thus, with this name, Caterina de’ Pazzi marked herself *at once* as an abject but remorseful sinner, conforming to a normative model that oscillated between polar extremes, without contradiction, within the terms of the dominant culture.

As with language in general, however, the name could not be tamed to one or two meanings. The eroticized Magdalen also had a place in the semiotic field in early modern Italy. Catholic reformers had denounced the eroticizing of sacred subjects as indecent and inconsistent with the ends of representation in the service of Christian faith (that is, to instruct in orthodoxy and to present models for imitation). The control of the bishops, however, who were responsible for approving images for public devotion, did not extend to private spheres of patronage, within which the taste for sexually charged imagery played itself out, particularly at elite levels of society. “Mary Magdalen” served as an ideal signifier in this context — for the referent (the embodied Magdalen who had moved in the social world) was not a figure from contemporary culture, but a woman from the early Christian past whose antiquity and associations with prostitution provided the kind of temporal and social distance for elites that made her eroticization licit. Indeed, the Magdalen became the vehicle for some of the most titillating images circulating in early modern Italy, several examples of which indicate the development of a pictorial tradition with its origins in the early sixteenth century. Titian’s *The Penitent Magdalen* of the 1530s [Fig. 5] (which pre-dates the Council of Trent) and Francesco Furini’s painting of the same subject of *circa* 1633 [Fig. 6] (which belonged to the world of Tridentine reform) both depend on the identification of the saint as “ascetic hermit,” an aspect of her persona developed exclusively in apocryphal and medieval sources.<sup>6</sup> The Magdalen’s withdrawal from human society in these sources led to her isolated existence in a grotto for thirty years, which explains the rustic setting in both works. The tears with which Titian and Furini stain her face also coded her as “penitent.” Tears were cast as the very image of confession and penitence by the Tridentine Church, with theologians invoking the tears of saints (including those of Mary Magdalen) in their defense of the sacrament of penance.<sup>7</sup> Thus weeping saints, widely deployed in text and image, were read metaphorically by

<sup>5</sup> See Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 12. Here I am depending on a relational or structural view of language, in which nothing has significance in itself but derives meaning from its relation to other things.

<sup>6</sup> For a summary of the most important of these sources, see Wilk 686.

<sup>7</sup> On the weeping of saints in the defense of the sacrament of penance, see Haskins 255-56.



many in this way.<sup>8</sup> Cristofano Allori's *The Contemplative Magdalen in the Desert* of 1612 [Fig. 7] casts Mary Magdalen as a hermit and a contemplative rather than a penitent; the figure gazes heavenward without shedding tears. The identification of the Magdalen as a contemplative ultimately depends upon her conflation with a woman called Mary in Luke 10:38-42, who listened quietly at the feet of Jesus while her sister, Martha, served.<sup>9</sup> The salient point here with respect to Titian, Furini, and Allori is that the Magdalen's eremitic retreat and asceticism provided an iconographic rationale for the depiction of her naked body in all three of their paintings.

In medieval representations of this subject artists had veiled Mary Magdalen's nakedness with an abundance of hair, as in the thirteenth-century Florentine panel with eight episodes from the Magdalen's conflated life (that is, with events drawn from apocryphal sources as well as from scripture), which appear around a central figure of her encased in a mantle of hair [Fig. 8]. Here the hair functions as a trope, signaling her naked body while exposing nothing other than her face, forearms, and feet. Beginning around the time of Titian, artists broke with protocols for the depiction of the Magdalen as hermit, contemplative, and penitent saint alike, not only emphasizing her state of undress but coding her as a sensual nude with voluptuous proportions and colorful modeling of the flesh — from Titian's ruddy browns, to Furini's shades of pink and blue. Thus they cast her into the realm of the erotic, setting up contradictions or tensions that are immanent or *internal* to the work, which do not come into play in earlier representations of the Magdalen as hermit. The earlier works operate as relatively more stable signs, at least in terms of what they offer for sight.

Livio Mehus's so-called *The Magdalen in Ecstasy*, executed circa 1665 [Fig. 9], serves as a late example in which the artist appears to have introduced ambiguity *intentionally*, within the pictorial field. His loosely draped Magdalen reclines on a couch and gazes upward with a cross in her right hand, between her open legs, and a halo at the back of her head. An angel in the left middle-ground plays with her ointment jar while another, in the foreground, holds a whip in a hand extended obliquely forward, drawing the viewer's attention to bodily

<sup>8</sup> Even before Tridentine reform, the Magdalen's centrality as a model of penance was secured in Florence, in large part by the fifteenth-century Archbishop and Observant Dominican Antoninus, who promoted her cult throughout the city. A 1473 manuscript of his treatise on confession, entitled *Specchio di coscienza*, which circulated widely in Florence in published form during the sixteenth century, even contains a five-page "transcription" of what purports to be the Magdalen's confession in her own words (Wilk 693). The material objects of devotion reflecting the intensified interest in Mary Magdalen as penitent during this period, however, including Donatello's famous polychrome wooden *Magdalen*, do not portray her weeping. The Magdalen's tears are reserved in the fifteenth century primarily for Crucifixion and Lamentation scenes.

<sup>9</sup> Mary and Martha enact the two models of Christian life, contemplative and active (Saxer 335-36; Malvern 27-38).



sensation through an allusion to mortification of the flesh. This relatively small painting (45 x 34 cm) formed a pendant with Mehus's *The Contemplative Magdalen* [Fig. 10]. The two originally depicted the "amorous adventures," as they have euphemistically been called, or the mythological rapes by Jupiter of Danaë and Asteria respectively (Cummings and Chiarini 282). Mehus seems to have transformed the paintings from profane to sacred in subject-matter with the addition of a few details and the removal or veiling of others (Cummings and Chiarini 282). Indeed, he simply left the eagle (the guise within which Jupiter appeared to Asteria) in the *Contemplative Magdalen*, where it has no iconographic justification in the context of Magdalen imagery and becomes a curious and almost unsettling landscape detail. Mehus based the first of the pendants, the "*Magdalen cum Danaë*," on famous paintings of Danaë by Correggio and Titian from the sixteenth century, works that cast the woman as a prostitute (with coins raining into her room) in the process of aestheticizing her rape by Jupiter (Mosco 233-34).<sup>10</sup> According to myth, the god entered Danaë's locked chamber in the form of a shower of gold (still visible in Mehus's painting, despite his attempt to enshroud it in clouds). Ancient sources had already played on the metonymy of "coins" for "gold," implying that the imprisoned woman did not resist but, rather, overcome by greed, succumbed to the power and allure of money (Santore). The paintings by Correggio and Titian operate analogically with respect to this tradition, although, by investing their figures with the appearance of sensuous abandon, they shift the emphasis from avarice (embodied in their works by a procuress or an angel) to bodily delight. Viewers familiar with this kind of cultural production would have enjoyed the formal and iconographic slippage between the sixteenth-century works and that of Mehus, the erotic reading of which was clearly overdetermined in the larger context of the reception of art, despite Mehus's inclusion of the halo, cross, and whip. The Tuscan Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici received this "*Magdalen cum Danaë*" into his private collection in 1701. Small in size compared to the paintings by Correggio and Titian, which are approximately three to four times as large (and some of which were intended as official gifts from one court to another), this and other diminutive works of the Magdalen were probably commissioned by men for private, personal delectation. Some may have hung on the walls of brothels, as did paintings of Danaë (Santore 412), where they would have also belonged to the visual world of women.

The fashioning of an erotic Magdalen represents a kind of excess of meaning with respect to the Magdalen as whore-turned-penitent, indicative of the complexity and indeed instability of the name as signifier. This multiplicity of meaning was compounded by other associations, including the Magdalen as

<sup>10</sup> For reproductions of the prototypes by Correggio and Titian, some of which were disseminated via prints by the seventeenth century, see Gould (Fig. 188) and Pallucchini (Figs. 301, 386, and 448).

Woman authorized to speak.

In the canonical Gospels, divine authority stands behind the speech of this New Testament woman. For example, after his Crucifixion and Resurrection in the Gospel of Matthew (28:9-10), Jesus addresses Mary Magdalen and another Mary. In Mark (16:9) and John (20:14) he appears to her alone, and in John 20:15-17 he directs her to speak on his behalf, to explain to the apostles the significance of the Resurrection and the imminence of his ascent. These passages implicitly assign her first place among the disciples of Jesus, whence her epithet *Apostola Apostolorum* ("Apostle of the Apostles"). It is scripture that ultimately affirms her authority to inform and to instruct as well as to speak. It also implicitly establishes her as the prototypical Christian mystic, at least in terms of popular belief in early modern Italy, where mystics claimed to receive immediate knowledge of God through visions of, and verbal exchanges with, the divine. *Maria Maddalena*, with her multiple visions and "colloquies with God," falls into this category.

The sanctioning of the Magdalen's speech becomes significant in the context of *Maria Maddalena's* attempts to speak authoritatively herself, despite protocols of silence within cloistered communities. I have already alluded to the erasure of her speech in posthumous representations of her, which effected her rehabilitation or normalization in semiotic terms, according to institutional codes of decorum in the seventeenth century. I do not invoke speech and gesture as unproblematic forms of representation granting access to a unitary, self-present subject — what Butler refers to in *Bodies That Matter* as the subject of modern humanist discourse, and Flax and de Lauretis describe as the Enlightenment subject of reason and self-determining thought. I do not presume that language functions instrumentally, allowing for the autonomous generation of meaning in an expression of authentic experience. Instead, I want to argue that subjectivity is *itself* the *effect* of language and other forms of representation. This theorizing of the self draws in part upon Lacanian psychoanalysis, although I should point out that certain aspects of psychoanalytic theory (not least of which, its overriding concerns with infantile loss and originary trauma, in addition to its discourse of lack, particularly with respect to femininity) compromise or hinder the project I have undertaken here, with its focus on institutional(ized) power- and object-relations in a present, in a here and now (or, a then and there, which is the putative concern of historians). Nonetheless, within this critical frame, which has much to offer on language and subject-formation, there would be no stable referent for *Maria Maddalena* in the social world, no self prior to *the formation of her self* in and through a wide range of signifying practices. In his lucid introduction to Lacanian psychoanalysis, Stephen Frosh asserts: "[T]here is [no] particular pre-existent subjectivity which learns to express itself in the words made available by language [here we might add, or in the representations made available in the larger semiotic field], but rather . . . the initially 'absent' subject becomes

concrete through its positioning in a meaning system which is ontologically prior to it. . . . The subject, the pronominal 'I,' is created through an order that originates outside it [and is more extensive than it]" (130). In other words, we are possessed and "spoken" by language we do not own ourselves; we are constructed to a large extent according to the possibilities offered within the semiotic field (Frosh 130).

The signifying or representational practices employed by Maria Maddalena involved voiced communication and a complex language of the body incorporating objects in the material world — in her case, devotional objects and works of sacred "art." A critical return to agency would take into account the framing of Maria Maddalena's actions by a semiotic field or grid, within which she (and, indeed, all of her contemporaries) had to take up positions that pre-existed their interventions as users of language and representation. Prevailing grids, of course, and the various subject-positions located on them are not fixed themselves; they can and do become reconfigured over time, through the repetition of codified acts which are stylized in ways that are contingent upon time, place, and one's location in the social field. Nonetheless, to begin to use language at all means to assume a place within pre-established structures of relations and to take on identities already defined by institutions (family, church, state) at a time prior to one's entry into culture. Far from possessing a fixed or stable self, Caterina de' Pazzi shifted as she moved through relations that structured her world of experience — "child" to her "parents" (which indicates the relational aspect of her self), she moved as "professed nun" within the confines of the convent. These two examples alone illustrate the shifting or oscillating aspects of the self, depending on the institutions (here, family and/or convent) within which she moved at any given time. The point here is that she performed a self within a matrix of identities already scripted by the time she gave them voice. Her "profession" as nun sets limits on her movements within the social world, even as normative protocols governed her actions as "mystic." Indeed, these actions constituted a citational practice based on models and precedents, which positioned her as mystic and enabled others to recognize (that is, to "read") and to acknowledge her as such within a culturally contingent semiotic field.<sup>11</sup> Here I am speaking of the textuality of subjectivity.

Doubts concerning agency inevitably return at this point: what possibilities remain for social interventions and change if subjects are constituted in and through their very performance of institutionally scripted identities, within a limited and limiting field of meaning? Here, I would suggest, a critical return to agency may be tied to performative or citational possibilities that open up within the range of normative significations. It is the porousness of signs and their ability to absorb multiple meanings (like "Mary Magdalen") that lay the foundation for these subjective possibilities, as we position ourselves in systems

<sup>11</sup> On gender and the citational self, see Butler, "Performative Acts."



of signs that originate outside us. Here the social and the semiotic overlap; and it is at this point of imbrication, within historically determined parameters, that we can play the instability of signs to advantage.

I have no unmediated access to the intentions of the woman who spoke as "Sister Mary Magdalen." The consonance of her chosen name as professed nun and the unauthorized discourse she generated in the convent may depend on nothing more than a felicitous coincidence. Nonetheless, I do not want to deny her intentionality or agency, even as I resist the disavowal of my own. I have argued that her subjectivity was constituted in and through the performance of identities already scripted before her interventions. Yet I have also indicated the complexity of her chosen name (and the same could be done with her baptized name, Caterina or "Catherine"),<sup>12</sup> to suggest that inflections of the script were possible, if only in culturally contingent ways. A critical return to agency, then, may well be tied to the possibilities for subjective manoeuvring *within* representations and the (limited) play of language itself. Here it is easy to see that distinctions between production and reception collapse. These distinctions lie at the heart of most art history today, even or perhaps most particularly Marxian art history — some might argue, despite the intentions of Marx himself. This notwithstanding, art history that draws on the political philosophy of Marx (which includes much feminist art history) generally construes these practices as radically different and mutually exclusive.<sup>13</sup> In addition, for Marx, lack of freedom or the impediment to radical, *revolutionary* agency (that is, social interventions that will bring about change) is the consequence of "false consciousness" as well as social inequity and exploitation. Liberal notions of rational self-reflection and enlightened thought about economic forces and relations of production that are said to shape the lives of the "proletariat" (an identity-category with no resonance for those working on pre-industrial Europe, and problematic even for modernists with respect to questions of gender, "production," and a presumed division between public and private spheres) serve as the necessary conditions for "emancipation," which drives his notion of agency. Here I have attempted to argue for a theory of agency outside the terms of liberal discourse, and for a theory of subject-formation that considers institutional(ized) structures of relations within which the subject emerges in culture *other than* those revolving around production, as it is defined in orthodox Marxist terms. The performative self, the citational self, the textual and

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<sup>12</sup> For a general typology of feminine sanctity in early modern Italy, and on Caterina Benincasa (Catherine of Siena) in particular as a hagiographical model for pious comportment at the time of Caterina/Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, see Zarri.

<sup>13</sup> This is particularly true of British feminist art history, much of which draws at least indirectly on Marxian thought. See, for example, Tickner, and Pollock. While very different in focus, both methodologically attempt a kind of feminist materialist history of art and, in the process, separate production and reception according to conventional Marxian practice.

spectacular self — this self refuses categorization as produced *or* received representation, for it constitutes or actualizes both at one and the same time. Then, finally, there is the question of our own interventions in production and reception — our mediation as historians of the subjects of our inquiry (here, Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi). To theorize production and reception (even with respect to interpretation) *outside* the terms of art historical discourse is an enabling step — perhaps the first necessary step — towards a rethinking of cultural production and agency, including our own.

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Fig. 1. Giovan Paolo Roffi. *Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi Paints in Rapture*. 1669. Oil on canvas. Dimensions unavailable. S.ta Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, Florence. (Photo: Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, 1992.)





Fig. 2. Francesco Morandini (il Poppi). *Mary Magdalen as Courtesan*. c. 1580. Oil on wood. 64 x 58 cm. Private Collection, Florence. (Courtesy of Marilena Mosco.)



Fig. 3. Alessandro Allori. *Portrait of a Noblewoman and Her Son*. 1574. Oil on wood. 110 x 87 cm. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Cattin Sumner Collection Fund. (Photo: Wadsworth Atheneum.)



Fig. 4. Agnolo Bronzino. *Portrait of Eleonora of Toledo and Her Son*. c. 1545. Oil on wood. 115 x 96 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. (Photo: Alinari / Art Resource, NY.)





Fig. 5. Titian. *The Penitent Magdalen*. c. 1531-35. Oil on wood. 84 x 69 cm. Pitti Palace, Florence. (Photo: Alinari / Art Resource, NY.)



Fig. 6. Francesco Furini. *The Penitent Magdalen*. c. 1633. Oil on canvas. 168 x 152 cm. Private Collection, Florence. (Photo: Courtesy of Marilena Mosco.)



Fig. 7. Cristofano Allori. *The Contemplative Magdalen in the Desert*. c. 1612. Oil on canvas. 145 x 91 cm. Pitti Palace, Florence. (Photo: Giuseppe Cantelli, *Repertorio della pittura fiorentina del Seicento*, 1983.)





Fig. 8. Anonymous. *The Penitent Magdalen with Episodes From Her Life*. c. 1280. Tempera on wood. 180 x 90 cm. Accademia delle Belle Arti, Florence. (Photo: Alinari / Art Resource, NY.)



Fig. 9. Livio Mehus. *The Magdalen in Ecstasy*. c. 1665. Oil on copper. 45 x 34 cm. Pitti Palace, Florence. (Photo: *La Maddalena tra sacro e profano*, 1986.)

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## Tra eros e caritas: le 'pene d'amore' di Maria Domitilla Galluzzi\*

**I**l limpido costrutto<sup>1</sup> che apre la *Vita di Suor Maria Domitilla Galluzzi narrata da lei stessa*, si configura, già dalle prime battute, come civile "conversare"<sup>2</sup> col confessore che le ha espressamente richiesto il resoconto dettagliato delle sue esperienze mistiche.

Nel momento in cui si accinge a scrivere la giovane visionaria è ormai da tempo incamminata per "li stretti sentieri dello spirito" (DS 77, c. 195 v.).<sup>3</sup> La

\* Severetta Galluzzi nacque ad Acqui, in Piemonte, nel 1595, da Ottavio e da Fiorenza Vertenna, genovese. Cresciuta in un ambiente familiare assai religioso e incline a pratiche penitenziali, manifestò, sin dalla più tenera età, un'appassionata vocazione per la vita monastica culminata, nel 1616, nella sua entrata nel monastero del Santissimo Sacramento in Pavia. Qui prese i voti, divenendo suor Maria Domitilla (nome di una zia a lei molto cara). Morì, nello stesso convento, circondata da un'aura di santità, nel 1671. Nonostante gli sforzi della sua comunità per elevarla agli onori degli altari, non è stata mai canonizzata. Di Maria Domitilla si sono qui esaminati i microfilms dei seguenti manoscritti (gentilmente concessi dal Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana): DS II 41 D. 77 (probabilmente autografo); CS II 19 G. 97; BS II 32 H. 91. Per notizie sui restanti manoscritti della stessa autrice si veda Matter, p. 166, n. 2.

<sup>1</sup> Petrocchi, p. 179: "È chiaro come non possa, oggi, ridursi il concetto di Barocco ad una specificazione e ad una estrinsecazione di tipo stilistico. Restringere il Barocco ad un gusto fastoso, o, peggio, ad un intellettualismo pomposo o stravagante significherebbe ridurre il modo di vita di un'epoca all'esame esteriore e all'accettazione di un 'decorativismo' che non tiene conto delle sostanziali strutture, intime e profonde, che reggono i "contenuti" umani del Seicento. . . . Nella prosa spirituale di molti libri di pietà non c'è la voluttà stilistica di apparire meravigliosi o ingegnosi. Ma questo . . . non autorizza a respingere fuori del mondo seicentesco — come scritture sopravvissute nel mare del tempo fluente — le testimonianze di questa letteratura devota, in quanto espressioni di una compostezza, di una semplicità e di una lucidità, che non rientrerebbero nel modulo tradizionale della 'prosa d'arte' religiosa del Seicento".

<sup>2</sup> De Certeau, p. 227: "Parlare e udire: il binomio definisce lo spazio in cui si effettuano i procedimenti dei 'santi' (così si chiamavano i mistici). Le questioni che essi trattano hanno valore di sintomi. Quelle essenziali si riducono a due: l'orazione (dalla meditazione alla contemplazione) e la relazione 'spirituale' sia con gli altri, sia (sotto forma di 'direzione spirituale') con i rappresentanti dell'istituzione ecclesiale. Allora, la 'comunicazione' divina e/o umana designa un atto. Focalizza racconti, trattati e poemi. È indicata da una parola soltanto nel vocabolario mistico spagnolo: *conversar* (parlare 'con Dio', oppure 'con gli altri')".

<sup>3</sup> Per confronti di analogia tra l'immagine della Galluzzi e quella di un mistico medievale, si veda Allen, p. 15: "The journey on foot to heavenly Jerusalem is a fundamental image in all Rolle's



sua voce letteraria si snoda dalle insodate profondità di un "avvenimento" intimo così intenso e sofferto che rende quasi impossibile la sua produzione "scrittoria". Domitilla è estremamente consapevole della difficoltà di dare una sembianza alla *terra di nessuno*, al "paese interiore": tra le righe di questo inizio si leggono i dubbi di chi è suo malgrado costretta a quantificare l'*alterità* della propria esperienza, a dare forma e finitezza all'*assenza*, delineandola e circoscrivendola "nella storicità di un discorso":<sup>4</sup>

Illustre e molto reverendo padre e mio confessore, veggo ormai chiaramente per isperienza che il suo prudente spirito ha disegnato [a] farmi diventar perfetta nella virtù dell'obbedienza . . . in cose molto contrarie alla propria volontà; e che, in quanto al spirito, paiono umanamente pericolose; e che, in quanto alla parte sensitiva, non mancherebbero cause per iscusarsi e alla ragione scrupoli per difendersi.

(c. 2 r. e v.)<sup>5</sup>

Il dubitare lascia trasparire una nota di combattività che però si stempera e si spegne nell'*annientamento* (Bergamo 4), umiliazione necessaria per il raggiungimento della perfezione:

. . . ma per diventar perfetta nella santa obbedienza, . . . però protesto a Dio e a vostra reverenza di voler acciecar il mio giudicio. . . . Non voglio che

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thinking. It is a narrow road [*Incendium*, Chap. 40]".

<sup>4</sup> Per maggiori chiarificazioni sul concetto di mistica *terra di nessuno* si veda de Certeau, p. 38: "Così l'assente che non è più in cielo e nemmeno sulla terra, abita la regione di una terza estraneità (né l'una, né l'altra). La sua 'morte' lo ha collocato in questa zona intermedia. In via approssimativa è la regione che . . . viene designata dai mistici". Per il "paese interiore" si veda lo stesso, p. 242: "Strana regione questo paese 'interiore', luogo invisibile e silenzioso dove si producono rivoluzioni prima ancora di venire alla luce. . . . Talora l'"avvenimento interiore" è così intenso che rende derisoria o impossibile la sua produzione verbale o scrittoria. Perché si dovrebbe dirlo? In che modo si potrebbe mutarlo nella storicità di un discorso?" Si veda anche Blanchot, p. 23: "Così l'opera è opera solo quando diventa l'intimità aperta di qualcuno che la scrive e di qualcuno che la legge, lo spazio violentemente dispiegato attraverso la reciproca contestazione del potere di dire e del potere di intendere".

<sup>5</sup> Per una più agevole fruizione dei brani del testo citati, ho proceduto, su di esso, alle seguenti modifiche: eliminazione della *h* etimologica e pseudo-etimologica; scioglimento della sigla tironiana in *e* nell'italiano e *et* nel testo latino; scioglimento di tutte le altre abbreviazioni; disciplina delle maiuscole (lasciandole inalterate per i nomi di divinità) e delle consonanti scempie e doppie; trasformazione della *ij* finale in *ii* e della *ti* intervocalica in *zi*; sostituzione della *u* consonantica con la *v*. Ho innovato la punteggiatura senza eccessivi interventi arbitrari, ponendo in parentesi quadre i nessi grammaticali e sintattici mancanti, laddove la comprensione del testo risultava più ardua. A causa dell'illeggibilità della numerazione nel microfilm del cod. G 97 ho indicato le citazioni testuali col numero dei capitoli a cui esse appartengono, menzionando le relative carte progressivamente con numeri ordinali.

passi più oltre che pensare che vostra reverenza fa questo solo per farmi imparare ad obbedire in cose contrarie alla mia volontà, la quale . . . io la voglio negare in ogni cosa. . . .

(cc. 2 v., 3 r.)

Viene qui delineandosi — oltre all' *espropriazione di sé*, tema-chiave della mistica secentesca (Bergamo 5) — lo stesso problema che s'era presentato anni prima, in circostanze e modulazioni solo accidentalmente differenti, a una più celebrata mistica d'amore, Teresa d'Avila. Posta entro i limiti dell'"autorità ecclesiale" che è "maschile" e "ordina, comanda e giudica oggetti distinti",<sup>6</sup> la donna è costretta suo malgrado a offrire la sua esperienza dell'*Altro* in termini di conoscenza, piuttosto che di illuminazione; è obbligata a rompere il silenzio che avvolge in una "zona franca"<sup>7</sup> la presenza del numinoso. Operazione, questa, che non richiede strumenti teologici, i quali d'altronde Domitilla — con candido autodisprezzo — dichiarerà più volte di non possedere.<sup>8</sup> Il discorso mistico al

<sup>6</sup> De Certeau, p. 269: "La parola femminile s'insinua nell'atto maschile di circoscrivere la scrittura. Nella *compañía* cara a Teresa, ogni sorella capisce che 'quando qualcosa giunge a dirsi' così, fra donne . . . questo non appartiene a una di loro, autore, . . . ma dipende dal parlare che sfugge all'appropriazione individuale come ai controlli sapienti. In questa sottile combinazione, l'autorità (ecclesiale) è maschile, una sorta di scena sociale per il nome del padre; la parola è femminile, conformemente alla tradizione ebraica della Sekina, figura femminile dello Spirito che è Parola. . . . L'autorità maschile definisce, circoscrive, comanda e giudica oggetti distinti, ma alla fine sembra estranea alla parola abbondante e "indistinta" che attraversa limiti individuali o scrittori e rinvia senza dubbio alla replica di un'esperienza femminile tramite un'esperienza marrana".

<sup>7</sup> De Certeau, p. 243: "I mistici capiscono perfettamente che il desiderio si dichiara al limitare del discorso quale impulso del suo sviluppo, ma con il *volo*, operazione e decisione del volere all' 'interno', isolano l'ipotesi teorica e necessaria di un' *autonomia* che, invece, non dipende né dagli oggetti, né dalle circostanze. Lo spazio dell' 'interno' corrisponde all' *affrancamento del principio etico*. Questa zona franca segna in effetti una differenza del volere rispetto alla legge delle cose o della scrittura; essa è lo scarto creato dall'atto che pone questa differenza e, di per sé anarchico, non ha nulla che lo leghi e lo determini; essa trasgredisce l'ordine dei fatti per affermare un luogo/non luogo di cominciamento. . . . Il discorso mistico apre il campo di una conoscenza diversa mediante il postulato etico di una libertà: 'Io/tu posso (ri)nascere'".

<sup>8</sup> Nonostante le basilari letture bibliche e patristiche che traspaiono dall'ordito della *Vita* (sono esplicitamente menzionati, tra gli altri, San Paolo, San Gregorio e Sant'Agostino), Domitilla preferisce inquadrarsi nel *cliché* dell'*illetterata illuminata* e continuamente ribadisce la sua incompetenza in fatto di materie spirituali: ". . . io non avevo mai avuto intelligenza né pratica di cose di spirito, né letto tali cose" (D 77, c. 128 v.). . . . "Cominciai quella Quaresima con desiderio di darmi tutta a Dio, ma non sapevo il modo, né alcuno me lo insegnava, né ebbi cognizione d'appigliarsi a qualche libro spirituale poiché io non ebbi mai gusto nel leggere, perché leggevo tanto interrotto che non intendevo ciò che leggevo, né capivo le sostanze, né v'era modo di farcele capire; onde il mio leggere era di fastidio a me stessa e alle altre" (cc. 126 v., 127 r.). Altre volte mette in discussione l'atto stesso del comporre l'opera: "Per aver io, femminuzia vile,

femminile apre il campo a una "conoscenza diversa", a una "libertà" diversa (de Certeau 243). La parola è evocata e rivitalizzata nel suo potere passionale ed emotivo, diviene *lavoro d'amore*:<sup>9</sup>

... e in particolare in questa, per amor del Signore e [del]le sue santissime virtù, per questo amore, dunque, darò principio a tali obbedienze, offerendo a Sua Divina Maestà tanti atti d'amore, d'obbedienza, di mortificazione e d'altra virtù quanto [sic] saranno le lettere e le parole che formano in tutto questo mio scrivere. ...

(c. 3 r.)

Mediata da un tessuto sintattico — nel quale le *exclamations* si intercalano, citando Matter, in una sorta di "hypnotic repetition" (71) — inizia la *recollection* nel "teatro atopico"<sup>10</sup> della memoria, dove l'*io* diviene "il punto centrale del testo, sia come eroe, sia come autore di esso" (de Certeau 258). La storia di Severetta inizia sulle soglie dell'esistere ed è — come è stato osservato (Matter) — "carefully wrapped ... and consciously cast in hagiographical form".<sup>11</sup>

mi ricordai che più volte mi disse mia madre che, arrivata al settimo mese di mia concezione, essendo ella giovinetta di sedeci anni [e] non avendo alcun riguardo, ognun si maravigliava che più volte si fosse dispersa; e, fra l'altre

messo mano a opera di sì grave impresa" (c. 391 v.), e così definisce il proprio stile: "... donna goffa e sempliciana come son io, il dire o scrivere queste cose ... anzi mi par meglio sarebbe a tacerle che dirle così rozze ... come faccio; pur non lo so parlar in altro linguaggio" (c. 279 r. e v.).

<sup>9</sup> Ci si riferisce qui alla bella opera kierkegaardiana tradotta in inglese con il titolo di *Works of Love. Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses*.

<sup>10</sup> De Certeau, p. 242: "Atopico, il teatro di operazioni lampo dette 'intenzioni' ('qui' e 'subito', dicono i mistici) si delinea secondo un criterio che ritroviamo costantemente nella letteratura spirituale, e che già organizzava la concezione che Plotino si faceva dell' 'interno' quando trattava della volontà. 'L'interno' è ciò che dipende da noi".

<sup>11</sup> Matter, p. 61: "It is likely that these materials were copied and collected as part of an unsuccessful attempt to canonize Maria Domitilla. But the very content of Maria Domitilla's testimony of self is carefully, and I would argue, consciously, cast in hagiographical form". Più di una volta, nella *Vita* è ribadita l'appassionata proiezione - identificazione con le vicende cristiche, sviluppatasi fin dalla primissima infanzia: "[A] circa sei anni cominciai a sentirmi crescer il desiderio di servir al Signore, qual mi pareva amar grandemente più de' miei genitori e più d'ogni altra cosa. Onde cercavo [di] intendere da mia madre chi era il Signore e la pregavo che mi raccontasse che cosa elli aveva fatto per nostro amore. ... E quando sentivo o raccontavo tali cose, sentivo un giubilo nel cuore ... grandissimo; ma, alli misteri della Santissima Passione, mi sentivo riempir di compassione e mi cadevano le lacrime dalli occhi" (cc. 13 v., 14 r. e v.). Nella cornice dell'agiografia è pure collocabile il seguente brano in cui, al momento dell'accettazione in convento il medico del Santissimo Sacramento prevedendo "gran cose" nel futuro di Domitilla: "... disse [alle monache] che non badassero ad accettarmi, perché aveva visto in me un non so che [di] divino e che avevo presto a diventar santa" (c. 96 r.).



cose, le occorre un meraviglioso caso e fu che, trovandosi in viaggio e di me molto aggravata, ma per la sua disposta gioventù non stimandomi, volse ricreativamente correre; e nel corso ella cascò con la faccia innanzi, sì che diede nel ventre un gran colpo contro la terra, che molti stimorno gli fusse crepato e la creatura morta; poichè, com'ella disse, io solevo muovermi assai di giorno e di notte; e allora, per tal colpo, stetti due giorni e notte [sic] senza punto muovermi, né dar alcun segno d' esser viva.

(c. 6 r. e v.)<sup>12</sup>

Domitilla delinea in rapide e vivaci pennellate — ma anche con calmo e misurato distacco — la sua infanzia precoce e introversa, già dai primissimi anni indirizzata al rifiuto dello spazio aperto e delle relazioni umane:

Da' primi anni di mia fanciullezza non so ciò che mi facessi; solo mi dicevano che così piccolina amavo star in casa e, che quando mi volevano portar fuori di casa, piangevo; e quando ebbi sciolte le manine, mi diffondevo in modo che offendevo . . . chi . . . voleva per forza portarmi fuori e mi buttavo indietro più che potevo. E quando cominciai andar da me sola, mi nascondevo in un piccolo luoghetto che era da una parte della scala; e io anco [lo] feci quando fui più grandina, sebbene bisognava che vi stessee curva e ingenocchiata; . . . e che, appena sapendo sciogliere la lingua, imparai facilmente molte orazioni e che le recitavo con molta grazia e affetto che muoveva a tenerezza e lagrime quelli che m'udivano.

(cc. 7 v., 8 r.)

Questo ritratto si iscrive nei canoni della più genuina e vitale tradizione del XVII secolo che voleva il mistico come antisociale e sovvertitore dei valori mondani.<sup>13</sup> Il *paese interiore* si viene conformando all'insegna del *rifiuto*: esso si

<sup>12</sup> “. . . onde, tutta piena di timore, se ne stava afflitta da gran male senza potersi muovere dal letto. Il terzo giorno, all'ora di vespro, si sentì sforzata da Dio a levarsi; e, posta in genocchioni, consacrarmi al suo divino servizio, che così io sarei tornata in vita. . . . La mia buona madre a così santa migrazione si levò; e, genuflessa innanti il santissimo Crocifisso, disse: 'Signore, io vi consacro questa creatura e vi prometto di allevarla nel vostro santo servizio ed esortarla ad esser religiosa'. . . . E, appena ebbe formato queste parole, . . . io fui [con] tanta allegrezza nel suo ventre che si spaventò; e mi soleva dire: 'Figliola, . . . io ti teneva per morta; ma, subito che io t'ebbi promessa al Signore, ben mi facesti intendere che tu eri viva e tanto ti rallegrasti che pareva volessi uscir da me'" (cc. 6 v., 7 r.).

<sup>13</sup> Bergamo, pp. 29-30: "Il Dio di Occam, e, sulla sua scia, tutto il cristianesimo moderno, irrompe nella vita dell'uomo come un disordine essenziale, è, per usare un'immagine cara a Surin, un abisso in cui la Ragione si perde, uno spazio in cui le leggi e i valori umani sono misteriosamente capovolti. A questa nuova iscrizione della divinità, va senza dubbio ricondotta l'enorme diffusione, nel XVI e ancora nel XVII secolo, del tema che associa la santità alla follia. Poiché Dio versa ormai nella sragione, poiché tutto lo oppone all'ordine sociale e cosmico, il mistico — il santo — sarà l'eroe di un contrordine assoluto. In un bellissimo poema di [Jean-Joseph] Surin [gesuita e mistico francese, 1600-1665] — *De l'Abandon intérieur pour se disposer à la perfection de*

quantifica in abborrimento della "vivacità" e della presenza maschile:<sup>14</sup>

Mentre dimorai in Genova, perché non vi trovai il mio luoghetto dove a casa, come in una celletta, mi solevo ritirare in solitudine, cominciai a diventar malinconica e spesso [a] piangere. . . . Alcune . . . cugine di mia età, ma inclinate alla vivacità e [ai] giochi fanciulleschi, mi erano moleste perché non aderivo alla loro ricreazione. . . . E desideravo il mio buco, dove a casa mia me ne stavo contenta come in monastero; e se bene ero molto amata da mia zia Domitilla, non sentivo gusto di star con lei, perché aveva molti servitori e giovani di scagna, li quali spesso mi volevano pigliar in braccio, il che io non volevo in modo alcuno; non volevo e tanto l'abborrivo che, come li vedevo, arrossivo, mi nascondevo e [mi] mettevo a piangere.

(cc. 11 v., 12 r.)

La "tastiera della memoria" (Gardet & Lacombe 34) si dispiega, nel discorso, in una successione di tasselli che s'intrecciano in un "canto solitario" ruotante intorno al sé; non si tratta, comunque, di un'"adorazione dell'io" (Gardet & Lacombe 64), bensì di un tentativo di "discesa" interiore che è, al tempo stesso, "risalita . . . verso il centro della soggettività" (Gardet & Lacombe 233). Nel descrivere l'evoluzione della *quête* si delinea in *primis* lo "spazio lacerato e conflittuale" (Bergamo 72) che s'apre tra l'intuizione e lo slancio ricettivo

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*l'Amour Divin* — l'amore di Dio non cessa di trasciversi in una sorta di desiderio antisociale, [in cui] volontà di purezza e volontà di contrordine slittano ininterrottamente l'una sull'altra. Il santo appare, strofa dopo strofa, *vagabond, illettré, insensé, sauvage*, in una danza continua dei segni medesimi che la società dell'epoca dispone, come altrettante marche del suo rigetto, attorno all'area della sragione".

<sup>14</sup> L'avversione di Domitilla per la presenza maschile è la nota dominante che caratterizza la sua esistenza pre-conventuale: si sentano i resoconti di due viaggi fatti prima della monacazione: ". . . anzi il demonio . . . mi pose in gravi pericoli, uno de' quali fu che fui invitata da una mia zia ad andare a stare alcuni giorni con lei al Dono Castello, lontano sette miglia da Novi. . . . Onde in tal viaggio patii travaglii e pericoli gravi. Il primo fu che il cavallo cascò nella prima acqua che trovò, per lo che grazie [sic] del Signore fu che io non restassi soffocata. Restai bagnata sino alla gola; per la qual cosa mi condussero ad una cascina fuori di strada, dove, mentre dalle donne di quella casa fui riceguta [sic] e fatta asciugare, si riempì la casa d'omini religiosi, di che ordine io non lo so, li quali volevano che io rimanessi quivi quella notte, allegando che non ci era possibile arrivare al Dono quel giorno. Mio cugino e la donna v'acconsentirono ma io non potei mai acquetarmi, non per istinto di malizia, ma per quella natural inclinazione con che fuggivo di star dov'erano omini; onde chiamai in secreto il servitore e mi partii così in fretta che mio cugino e la mia donna non potevano seguire il . . . cavallo; e fu sempre tanta la resistenza che sentivo in star dov'erano omini, che sino da piccolina non potei mai soffrire esser pigliata in braccio da' servitori. . . . Mi ricordo che facendo viaggio in lettica con mia zia e il confessore, stando io nel banchettino di mezzo, usai molta diligenza di non toccar con le mie le vesti del confessore; il che, avvedendosene mia zia, se ne servì per ricreazione, facendomi delle burle con fare inavvedutamente toccare le vesti mie li piedi del confessore. Del che avvedendomi, ne sentivo disgusto" (cc. 45 v., 46 r. e v.; 47 r.).

femminili e l'autorità religiosa maschile che tenta di limitarli (e stigmatizzarli):

Il confessore mi fu sempre contrario dicendo che [io] aveva da vivere come in un inferno; . . . e con altre simili cose spaventose mi dissuadeva d'esser cappuccina, e anco religiosa, soggiungendo che per non aver il dono dell'orazione mentale e non godendo [di] soavissimi trattenimenti con Dio, essend'io di natura allegra e vivace, ritrovandomi rinchiusa, cadrei in tal malinconia che mi trarrebbe nel fitto della disperazione.

(c. 86 r. e v.)

La reazione di Domitilla si colloca in un luogo di "intransigenza e di passione" (Cixous & Clément 98):

. . . io sorridendo e non movendomi punto per queste sue minacce, risposi che Dio me la daria; e, che se si poteva imparare, io presto mi sforzaria [di] impararla.

(c. 86 v.)

L'accettazione nel monastero del Santissimo Sacramento è narrata dalla visionaria con forti accenti d'emotività. È come se le pulsioni affettive represses e negates nel secolo trovassero nell' *hortus conclusus* della clausura il loro canale di sbocco, irrompendo con impeto infantile attraverso il linguaggio corporeo: comportamento, questo, di cui l'autrice si rammaricherà più volte, nel corso della narrazione:<sup>15</sup>

Onde, porgendomi monsignore l'abito [della vestizione], lo pigliai con ambe le mani e, dandoli molti baci, me lo stringevo al petto come cosa carissima. . . Fui subito menata in conversazione con le monache, onde con loro sfogai

<sup>15</sup> Quanto più l'*iter* mistico procede, tanto più Domitilla si rimprovera le manifestazioni d'affetto usate verso le consorelle: ". . . era la mia allegrezza così grande e il giubilo di core così veemente, che ero sempre incline a far carezze a tutte e di ciò anco sentivo stimolo, poiché alle secolari non solo non feci tali leggierezze ma ne anco le potevo sopportare a[d] altri". "Queste buone madri, le quali pure qualche volta mi riprendevano, ma io . . . tanto le amavo, che credevo . . . che ciò avevano fatto con gusto; . . . le abbracciavo strettamente le gambe e baciavo l'abito, sì che esse con gusto mi porgevano la faccia". "Oh, quanto sono amare le riprensioni dell'amabilissimo sposo, quando le [alla sposa] rinfaccia le sue infedeltà e le fa chiaramente conoscere com'elli tiene a mente com'un vano gusto impiega nelle creature l'amor che era obbligato a impiegare in lui, suo sposo. Anzi, che dico, so che spesso io sfogai con le creature l'amor con cui ero obbligatissima a riamar il mio dolce Dio . . . e, geloso della sua sposa, per amore quest'amabilissimo Signore il quale mi fa sentir questo dolore per aver portato affetto a queste sue serve, solo con averle abbracciate e bacciate. . . ." "A voi [Cristo] dono tutte le viscere dell'amor mio, a voi consacro questo mio core, abbruggiatelo voi con l'amorose fiamme del vostro dolcissimo". "E con mia estrema pena intendevo che io avevo fatto tutte queste ingiurie al mio Signore, mentre ero stata in quelle leggierezze e trattenimenti con le mie sorelle; e con l'occasione distratte e mal esempio" (cc. 103 r. e v.; 104 r. e v.; 224 r. e v.; 225 r. e v.).



parte del grande affetto del mio core, abbracciandole, baciandole e restando a tutte affezionatissima; e in questa vita perseverai doi anni.

( c. 103 r. e v.)

Partita alla ricerca dell'orazione mentale — che si configura negli schemi religiosi come propedeutica alla comunicazione diretta col divino —<sup>16</sup> Domitilla adotta il *self-punishment* come mezzo disciplina “empowering of the technologies of the self”.<sup>17</sup> In esso indulgerà in modo penoso e sistematico, a volte “grottesco” e “stravagante” (Finke 40) nel corso della sua vita monastica.

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<sup>16</sup> Prima della monacazione il cammino verso l'orazione mentale si rivela dolorosamente impervio: “ Io gli chidei [al confessore] una breve intrazione [introduzione] per imparare a far bene l'orazione mentale, elli me la scrisse; ma, per esser molto alta, per quanto ora conosca, non la potei mai capire. La leggevo e straleggevo, ma non la potevo intendere . . . e mi sentivo che nel cuore non è ancor il tempo, sí che pensai mi fusse riservata a darmela quando fossi nella religione” (cc. 86 v. 87 r.). Una volta cappuccina, Domitilla scopre gradualmente l'efficacia degli “esercizi” (c. 156 r.) assegnatili dal confessore: “Gli esercizi che vostra reverenza mi ha dato in tanto tempo e che n'era molto abbondante atteso che sempre mi confessavo, che pur era due volte la settimana, conforme al solito della religione, me li mutava e me li addossava così bene e per l'aggiutto [aiuto] di qualche virtù, o per resistere alle tentazioni, o per vincere qualche passione, o per corrisponder a qualche grazia che pareva gli nascesse dal cuore conforme al mio bisogno; e ho sempre conosciuto che non solo m'erano utili, ma necessari per camminare alla santa perfezione. . . .” “ . . . e sebbene alcune volte al senso parevano amari e contrarii, li trovai sempre in effetto propriissimi, onde come vostra reverenza sa, non ne recusai mai alcuno, ma gli abbracciai con tutta la volontà e li faceva con tanta dolcezza, che il Signore mi comunicava tanta fecondità, che in farle [sic] le consumavo le ore; e conosco che me li mutava conforme all'ascesa dell'anima, tirandola sempre a qualche altezza di più, per lasciarla spronata all'acquisto di quello che conosceva li mancava. Un'altra utilità conosco, che riceve l'anima mia dalli suoi esercizi: ed è quando il Signore cominciò ad illuminare la mia mente con li suoi celesti raggi. Vostra reverenza mi diede anco esercizi atti a questo; e, sospendendo il Signore la mia mente fuori dalle immagini, mi diede vostra reverenza esercizi senza immagini, acciocché forse innalzasse più a Dio nella purità di Dio; o forse anco per vedere se le operazioni erano immaginarie formate dalla natura, ovvero divine; e non dar occasione alla natura o al demonio d'ingannarmi” (cc. 157 v. , 158 r. e v.).

<sup>17</sup> Finke, p. 41: “Mystics took disciplines designed to regulate and subject the body and turned them into what Michael [sic] Foucault has called ‘technologies of the self,’ methods of consolidating spiritual power and authority, perhaps the only ones available to women. Foucault argues that individuals often effect by their own means a certain number of operations on their bodies, souls, thoughts, and conduct—all to transform themselves and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, and supernatural power. Although he is describing the medieval Catholic discipline of confession, he might just as well be describing the lives of many medieval mystics. Michel de Certeau takes Foucault's argument about technologies of the self even further, and argues that these mechanisms, which he calls “poaching,” enable those subjected to disciplinary technologies to manipulate and evade them, or even shape them to their own ends, by seeming to conform to them. To understand how self-torture could become a technology of the self, a means of empowerment we must understand the place of torture in medieval society.”

L'autotortura segue un *pattern* assai simile — anche se giocato su un tono minore e molto meno plateale — a quello di una visionaria nota per i suoi 'eccessi di pietà', Angela da Foligno.<sup>18</sup> Come Angela, Domitilla scopre i "territori instabili" (Lochrie 128) dell'*abiezione di sé*;<sup>19</sup> entro cui il misticismo femminile, elusi i timori dell'autorità, entra in un'area ribelle (Lochrie 120-131), laddove l'espropriazione della dignità individuale diviene *imitatio Christi*:

Avevo per esercizio far un numero di mortificazioni, le quali cercavo far più bene che fosse possibile, onde li officii vili erano molto cari e di gran gusto; e, tra li altri, essendo la religione allora molto scomoda de' luoghi comuni, si tenevano in dormitorio vasi a tal effetto; li quali io vedevo spesso; e, quando li portavo via, li tenevo con ambe le mani per starvi meglio sopra con la faccia a sentire il suo [sic] odore. E questa era una delle cose che facevo nel numero delle mie mortificazioni, se ben era con tanto gusto che dubito non aver avuto merito di mortificazione. Nettevo anco, e baciavo li luoghi comuni e altre immondizie per compir il mio numero, stavo de' pezzi maneggiando e sentendo il mal odore della casa dove stavano li pepoli brutti di cauterii di tutte le monache; li pigliavo e baciavo per divozione; non sapevo che panni fossero, ma credevo che l'adoperassero per medicar le piaghe fatte dalle discipline e penitenze; onde se ne ritrovavo alcuno per casa, lo pigliavo e baciavo e mettevo al collo come un gioiello quando spazzavo il monastero.

(cc. 106 r. e v.; 107 r.)

<sup>18</sup> Finke, p. 38: "In this passage from Angela's *Liber*, for instance, we see an intense loathing for the "lower - bodily stratum" and the grotesqueness of the physical body expressed through the desire to inflict humiliation on it. 'I do not blush to recite before the whole world all the sins that I have ever committed. But I enjoyed imagining some way in which I could reveal those deceptions and iniquities and sins. I wanted to go through the squares and the towns naked, with fish and meat hanging about my neck, saying, 'Here is that disgusting woman, full of malice and deception, the sewer of all vices and evils. . . .'"

<sup>19</sup> Lochrie, p. 128: "By definition, abjection is an ordeal of the self in which 'nothing is familiar.' It is experienced as a kind of fear and revulsion precipitated by the loss of boundaries of the subject. The 'I' finds itself 'ceaselessly straying' in 'unstable territories.' The object is that which 'does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'" Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, pp. 12-13: "S'il est vrai que l'abject sollicite et pulvérise tout à la fois le sujet, on comprend qu'il s'éprouve dans sa force maximale lorsque, las de ses vaines tentatives de se reconnaître hors de soi, le sujet trouve l'impossible en lui-même: lorsqu'il trouve que l'impossible, c'est son être même, découvrant qu'il n'est autre qu'abject. L'abjection de soi serait la forme culminante de cette expérience du sujet auquel est dévoilé que tous ses objets ne reposent que sur la perte inaugurale fondant son être propre. Rien de tel que l'abjection de soi pour démontrer que toute abjection est en fait reconnaissance du manque fondateur de tout être, sens, langage, désir. . . . La chrétienté mystique a fait de cette abjection de soi la preuve ultime de l'humilité devant Dieu, comme en témoigne cette sainte Elisabeth, qui 'toute grande princesse qu'elle estoit, aymait sur tout l'abjection de soy-mesme.'"

In questo contesto di valori ribaltati la "fame e il desiderio" di servire Cristo (c. 116 r.), si quantificano nel rigetto del cibo, la "holy anorexy"<sup>20</sup> che è la regione più remota della terra dell'abiezione, quella più arcaica, luogo in cui la volontà viene mimetizzata in istinto; in cui il corpo, invaso dal divino, può cercare senza freni la sua mancanza e la sua perdita (de Certeau 71-72):<sup>21</sup>

Ora in questo tempo della religione . . . nel primo anno della probazione le novizie, come non ancora obbligate al rigore, gli era concesso spesso mangiar . . . e non stare continuo al digiuno. . . . A me non piaceva questa usanza e mi era di gran pena, . . . per desiderio di digiunare; . . . sicché ora che mi comunicava ogni giorno era maggior lo stimolo e travaglio di questo benedetto mangiare; . . . e pure non potevo far forza da [sic] mangiare come le altre facevano, perché se per questo rispetto, . . . resistendo per questo al mio natural istinto e stimolo, mangiavo [e] mi conveniva renderlo subito, il che era doppio travaglio, temendo che le monache, accorgendosi di questi vomiti, pensassero che io fossi inferma e così mi mandassero via. Onde cercai quanto potei per non lasciarlo sapere.

(cc. 110 r. e v. ; 111 r. e v.)

Il corpo femminile, trasformato in "vaso immondo" (c. 266 v.) del *sacro*, diviene *teatro* (Cixous & Clément 10), palcoscenico su cui "each pain, each symptom will release a demon" (Cixous & Clément 11), sprofondando la donna in quella che dal punto di vista medico può inquadrarsi nella prospettiva della dissociazione isterica (Arbman I, 45; Leuba 89). I postumi di una caduta (cc. 120 v., 121r.) portano la già stremata giovanetta sulle soglie dell'annientamento fisico:

Mi sopravvenne una gran febbre e restò il corpo mio grave come di piombo; e dicevano le madri che questo era segno di morte.

(c. 121 r.)

<sup>20</sup> Matter, pp. 67-68: "One must wonder, though, how 'healthy' a diet totally lacking in protein, calcium, and most vitamins could possibly be, especially over the course of years spent routinely enduring cold, heat, deprivation of sleep, and various forms of corporal punishment. It seems, rather, that the nuns of the Monastery of the Blessed Sacrament of Pavia lived in a continual state of semi-starvation; one that, while chosen (in Maria Domitilla's case, ardently so), was nonetheless hardly a *personal* expression of religious striving." Sull'anorexia si senta anche Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, p. 10: "Dégoût d'une nourriture, d'une saleté, . . . spasmes et vomissements. . . . Le dégoût alimentaire est peut-être la forme la plus élémentaire et la plus archaïque de l'abjection".

<sup>21</sup> Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, pp.15-16: "Celui par lequel l'abject existe est donc un *jeté* qui (se) place, se *sépare*, (se) situe et donc *erre* . . . le *jeté*, l'exclu, n'est jamais un, ni *homogène*, ni *totalisable*, mais essentiellement *divisible*. . . . Constructeur de territoires, de langues, d'œuvres, le *jeté* . . . est en somme un *égaré*. Un voyageur dans une nuit à *bout* fuyant. Il a le sens du danger, de la perte que représente le pseudo-objet qui l'attire, mais ne peut s'empêcher de s'y risquer au moment même où il s'en démarque. Et plus il s'égaré, plus il se sauve".



L'indebolimento e la conseguente "confusione psichica" si risolvono in uno stato di "intenso conflitto" (Belford Ulanov 65) in cui l'*animus* prolifera in archetipi<sup>22</sup> dapprima estremamente negativi:<sup>23</sup>

e, circa le ventidue ora [sic], mi sentii sollevata la mente con tanto impeto, che mi pare che il cervello s'aprisse e restai come fuori di me, al parer delle monache; e stetti quasi quattr'ore e ragionai molte volte, per quanto esse m'hanno poi riferito. Prima combattei con il demonio, il quale vedevo intorno la lettiera in molta brutta forma di diversi animali e puoi nella forma come si suol dipingere, il qual mi rinfacciava le leggerezze usate con le monache.

...

(c. 121 v.)

Dallo stato di frammentazione della *psicomachia* un cerchio protettivo nasce e si "sovrappone al caos".<sup>24</sup> Esso assume le caratteristiche del *locus amoenus*, a-spaziale e a-temporale, in cui, dopo avere superato oscure profondità, la psiche s'addentra in territori luminosi. Le figure positive della memoria di Domitilla fanno corona al Cristo bambino, comparso nella sua indifesa umanità, simbolo del centro più alto e differenziato del sé.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ulanov, p. 46: "'Archetype' is a symbolic concept. It conceptualizes our experience, but it is not a mere nominalistic designation. It has the symbolic function to mediate to consciousness the objective reality of the psyche that is not directly accessible to our sensory perception or to our logical reason. Archetypes symbolize the life of the nonindividual psyche that we all experience but which is not our personal possession. We feel the drive effect of the archetype, its emotional patterns and images, but we do not experience the archetype *per se* because 'an archetypal content expresses itself, first and foremost, in metaphors'".

<sup>23</sup> Ulanov, p. 41: "For the woman, the archetype of the animus symbolizes the masculine elements in her personality; its function is to mediate the contents of the objective psyche to her conscious ego. The nuclear core of the animus archetype is represented by such male images as the laborer, judge, teacher, monk, Prince Charming, prophet. . . . It is represented mythologically in tales having to do with the masculine in all its forms, such as the conquering hero, the great king, or the wise man, and is symbolized by male deities such as Zeus, Dionysus, Apollo, Pan, or the Devil".

<sup>24</sup> Ulanov, p. 65: "The self is also represented by the mandala [immagine simbolica che secondo la teoria junghiana rappresenta l'archetipo dell'inconscio] in its varied forms, as square, globe, rose, lotus, star, and the quadrated circle which combines an encircling centered totality with four cardinal directions, such as a circle with a cross in it. Examples of mandalas are the zodiacal circle, the Tibetan World Wheel, Christ surrounded by the four evangelists. . . . Mandala symbolism appears in times of psychic confusion and intense conflict, as if to superimpose on chaos a psychological 'view finder', as Jung calls it, that assigns each content its proper place and holds together the confusion within a protective circle. Mandalas also appear after long periods of psychological development as if to symbolize release from the conflict of opposites and to convey the numinous impact of their reconciliation".

<sup>25</sup> Ulanov, p. 65: "Because the self's imagery emphasizes wholeness and centeredness and because the self relates to the ego as a determining, integrating center, there are many parallels

Finito il contrasto con il demonio, entrai in un luogo tutto ameno dove vidi una gran turba, . . . la qual tutta di coro in coro mi passava appresso e saliva al cielo. . . . [Vidi] Giesú in età come di tre anni, vestito di rosso. . . . Nelle schiere delle vergini . . . conobbi la mia madre Santa Clara e Santa Domitilla. . . . Vidi, vidi . . . il mio serafico padre San Francesco; . . . e vicino a lui era mio padre. . . .

(cc.122 r. e v.; 123 v.)

Il discorso comincia qui ad erodersi, a mostrare *défaillances* nelle strutture sintattiche (Bergamo 99) che s'aggregano in nuclei di condensazioni e spostamenti semantici (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 91). Nel tentativo di dare una sembianza all'*Assente*, in questo "luogo / non luogo" (de Certeau 243), la parola diviene "avida" e totalizzante (*Tales of Love* 149), inizia a servirsi — con progressione da ora in poi costantemente ascendente — del linguaggio dell'*eros* per esprimere la *caritas*.<sup>26</sup> È l'amore — che invasa e schiavizza<sup>27</sup> l'estatica — a parlare attraverso di lei, con "passionate body-words" (Cixous & Clément 95):

L'amatissimo Signore . . . voleva rischiarar le tenebre della mente mia e farmi schiava nell'amorosa prigione. (c. 127 v.)

Fu la mente mia così illustrata dalli raggi della divina chiarezza e l'anima

between the self and the imagery of religious figures. Jung understands the Christ symbol as of the greatest psychological importance because it is one of the most highly differentiated and developed symbols of the self."

<sup>26</sup> Innumerevoli sono nella *Vita* le immagini pervase d'*eros* sublimato in un contesto mistico. Domitilla parla dell'"innamorato Signore" (c. 273 v.), di "Giesú dolcissimo amante" (c. 411 r.), vede se stessa "accarezzata dal Signore" (c.181 r.); osserva "l'amato" starle "accanto in atto di bellissimo giovane che d'ogni parte spirava amore e . . . mostrava affetto come se fosse . . . grandemente innamorato" (c. 420 r.); compara se stessa a "Maria Maddalena, sua dolcissima amante" (c. 316 v.). In un impeto di esaltazione, crea un "amoroso canto": ". . . sentivo tanta gioia che spesso prorompevo in amoroso canto, sentendomi desiderio di dar particolar gusto al Signore . . . in quel giorno che restai segnata con quei cari segni d'amore [il dono della santa orazione e meditazione] m'ingegnai [di] far molti atti di povertà e d'altre virtù, esercitandomi nelli servizii più vili della religione, uno dei quali fu che la vigilia di detta festa ottenei licenza di trasportar un grosso mucchio di letame da un loco all'altro assai lontano e in questo esercizio, per esser in loco solitario, m'esalai molto la mia . . . gioia con diverse ispirazioni ed amorosi canti; e, fra gli altri, mi venne in mente questo: 'Amor, divino amor./ che vai cercando un cuor./ vieni a pigliarti il mio / che in dartelo in preda ho gran desio'. E quello lo cantai quasi in tutti i viaggi che feci da un loco all'altro; [e], con tal occupazione e desiderio, finii la mia giornata" (cc.187 v., 188 r.).

<sup>27</sup> In molti passi dell'opera Domitilla definisce se stessa schiava dell'amore divino: "Il solenne giorno della Santissima Trinità fu elevato il Santissimo Sacramento nella santa messa, mi inabissò in una splendissima luce che da quello uscì; ed in esso facendo l'anima mia indegna con incendio d'amore il suo diletto il quale le disse: "O diletta, schiava della individua Trinità. . . ." "E, quando mi chiama . . . schiava, sento un contento indicibil" (cc. 398 r. e v.; 440 r.).

mia cosí infiammata dalle faville della dolcissima carità di Dio. . . . Gustai tanto del suo amore che quel poco che li aveva portato mi pareva niente e meno del niente, . . . sì che io non volevo parlar nel linguaggio dell'amore, ma che l'amore parlasse in mia lingua, cosí alla grossolana, onde dicevo: . . . "Come tardi t'ho conosciuto, amor mio dolce". . . . Trasfigurò l'anima mia e cuor mio in tal modo che non potei nascondere; poichè . . . la faccia mia divenne foco, la mente sospesa e il cuore che d'amor parlava, or in latino, or in volgare. . . .

(cc. 128 v.; 129 r., 130 r.)

Nella volontà dell'*io* che tenta con ogni sua forza di annullarsi e di ri-emergere come *Altro*, Domitilla è prona, in maniera diametralmente opposta a quella di un'Angela Mellini,<sup>28</sup> all'interlocutore (lo stesso confessore che le ha ordinato di scrivere il resoconto). Egli diviene il punto di riferimento umano pressoché unico della donna (isolata e sbeffeggiata dalle consorelle e sorvegliata con un misto di odio e di disprezzo dalle superiori) a cui chiedere le obbedienze, gli "esercizi" e con cui avere i "ragionamenti spirituali" (c.134 r.). La giovane sente gli ordini di quest'uomo conformi alla sua indole assetata di perfezione; essi le ispirano un poetico linguaggio, di molto vicino ad alcuni intelletti contemplativi operanti nella "Lombardia quietista" del Seicento (Petrocchi 223).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Monter, pp. 83-84 : "Consider the example of one such pseudo-saint, Angela Mellini, tried by the Bologna Inquisition in 1698. An illiterate seamstress in her mid-thirties, she had joined the Ursulines, the lay sisterhood which taught reading poor girls. More to the point, Mellini was an autonomous woman who kept changing confessors until she found one to her liking and subsequently enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with him. After a few years, she had managed her spiritual exercise of prolonged meditation well enough to have numerous visions, including one at Christmas time, in which the Virgin handed her the newborn Christ-child and Mellini began to nurse him feeling considerable physical sensations. She had also avowed her sexual desires toward her confessor; he answered by describing his own sexual desires toward other women and begged her to pray for him to keep him continent. After about a year he taught her to write so that she could keep a spiritual diary (which survives). Whenever she confessed, which was often, because she took communion several times a week, they would bless each other, in Latin. He had taken to calling her *madre*, even *mama*. . . . This was clearly not 'spiritual guidance' as the Council of Trent understood it. One of Mellini's friends and co-workers finally denounced her to the Inquisition."

<sup>29</sup> In vari punti della *Vita*, oltre al succitato, Domitilla s'esprime con un linguaggio sorprendentemente vicino a quello del cappuccino Fra Paolo da Terni (Paolo Manassei, 1587-1620). Manassei è autore di un trattato, *Paradiso interiore*, un'opera in cui "è ben visibile . . . l'amor puro di Dio". In esso la tradizione contemplativa cristiana dell'età apostolica e post-apostolica, e ancora l'esperienza dei *Salmi* e del *Cantico dei Cantici* sono rivissute con un'intima forza di suggestione. Il primo stadio è l'amor di Dio *sdegnato* e *contristato*: l'anima si sente arida, desolata per la lontananza dello sposo: . . . "Signor mio caro, perché non mi dai l'amor tuo, che tanto desidero e bramo? Perché non m'abbruggi a questo fuoco?" (Petrocchi 220). La stessa similarità tra i due autori si ritrova nel tema dell'*abisso*: Manassei così s'esprime: "Gettarmi



[Gli "esercizii" e i "ragionamenti spirituali"] parevano delicata rugiada che cadeva sopra la sitibonda terra dell'anima mia; con la qual si rinverdi di desideri, si riempì di fiori e subito cominciò a spontar fuori li frutti.

(c. 134 r.)

A colui che conosce il "fondo" del suo "core" (cc. 131 v., 132 r.) Domitilla dà "la volontà, l'anima e il corpo" (133 v.), nel desiderio ardentissimo di emulare Cristo, adorato punto centrale della *quête* (Matter 70). Nel *théâtre* dell'immaginario mistico essa si autorelega nel ruolo di "feminuzia vile" (391v.), "ignorantissima e niente pratica delle cose spirituali" (c. 256 r.); e all'uomo conferisce gli attributi di dotto, equilibrato regolatore del suo incalzante desiderio di numinoso. Tale schema dualistico/oppositivo ricalca ancora, in piena totalità, il medievale "double binarism" che voleva, come scrive Lochrie, "that man is to woman as soul is to flesh" (118).

Anche in questo caso — com'è accaduto per altre mistiche — l'*imitatio Christi* si connota di una doppia natura: è uno spazio *aperto*, cioè, come propone Irigaray, "the only place in the history of the West in which woman speaks and acts so publicly" (191); e, al tempo stesso, si rivela essere *recinto*, cosmo laterale in cui l'"interno lume" nel suo espandersi, pone l'*abietto* al servizio del sublime:

Restai infiammata di sviscerato amore verso il mio dolcissimo Giesù ed accesa d'estremo odio e disprezzo di me stessa, con ardente desiderio di patir per il mio Signore; il quale, avendomi per particolar grazia concesso vostra reverenza, a lui ricorrevo e li chiedevo puntualmente licenza d'eseguire quanto mi comunicava l'interno lume; e in particolare intorno alle mortificazioni e penitenze, dove il mio desiderio era così vivo che, [se] la prudenza sua non m'avesse saputa raffrenare e giustamente governare, avrei fatto delle pazzie e rovinata la complessione nelle indiscrezioni; poichè, per l'amore che mi sentivo nel patire e per l'odio di me stessa, . . . non ero mai sazia, né stanca d'affaticarmi; e sempre s'offerivano alla mente novi modi di patimenti; li quali però non effettuai mai . . . senza il parere, consiglio e obbedienza di vostra reverenza. . . . Mi convené prima, che, oltre al nostro digiuno continuo quotidiano, io digiunassi due giorni della settimana in pane e acqua. . . . Io li chiedevo e mi concedeva il far delle discipline in privato, oltre le ordinarie in comune . . . uso della religione. . . . Le chiedei licenza di farle con mazze di ortiche e mi riuscì bene, perché non fanno strepito; e vi perseverai gran tempo con molta mia consolazione; anzi, non contenta di questo, andavo spesso a spasseggiar scalza in essa [sic] nei luoghi dove erano nell'orto più alte e pongenti, facendoli luogo d'entrar sotto l'abito e tormentarmi tutta. Me ne mettevo in seno, nelle spalle, nelle maniche, sì che la mia vita era tutta piena di quei brugoloni che

suol cangiare le punture delle ortiche; e, tutta infiammata, . . . io mi godevo, ricordandomi di quanto aveva per error mio patito il mio Signore.

(cc. 135 v., 136 r.; 138 r., 140 v.; 141 r. e v.)

Domitilla diviene *la donna che si perde* (de Certeau 71-72), la *vittima* che deve marchiarsi con la pubblica tortura, perché essa rappresenta l'unico "sistema semiotico" con cui si può conferire un'identità al corpo e, allo stesso tempo, si può fuggire da esso.<sup>30</sup>

L'imitazione di Cristo prende forma in una livida "*regio dissimilitudinis*"<sup>31</sup> in cui si convocano gli spettatori per lo spettacolo della "pubblica umiliazione" (Lochrie 130):

. . . ma non perciò ero soddisfatta: m'ingegnai di pregar la reverenda madre abbadessa a ciò che ingaggiasse alcune sorelle, come tre o quattro in compagnia di noi novizie e ci lasciasse fare le battiture del Signore, or per i peccatori, or per un bisogno, or per un altro, servendomi di tutte le occasioni che potevo. Con molto mio contento e spasso le facevo. . . E [di] spargere il sangue era così grande il desiderio che non mi pareva di patir niente. Cercai sempre ogni via per conseguir occasione di patire e mi esponevo a tutte le confessioni, desiderando che tutte queste madri conoscessero e odiassero me stessa nel modo che facevo io. Per lo che ottenei più volte da vostra reverenza di star alla porta della chiesa con le mani legate dietro le spalle, con li occhi bendati, . . . pregando le madri a voler percotere; . . . e quelle che ciò facevano mi davano incredibile gusto. . . Alcune di quelle [penitenze] che vostra reverenza mi diede, mi fece alcune volte andare in refettorio con grosse pietre al collo e sopra le spalle e dir mia colpa. . . . Mi faceva prostrar in mezzo al refettorio e calpestar da tutte, baciare a tutte li piedi e simili altre mortificazioni.

(cc. 141 v., 142 r. e v.; 143 r.)

<sup>30</sup> Finke, pp. 41-42: "In the Middle Ages, torture was not regarded simply as a form of punishment. It was, as Foucault has shown, a technique and a ritual, a semiotic system which 'must mark the victim.' Torture inscribed on the victim's body the 'signs' of the ruler's power. It was one of the most visible displays of that power, an art, 'an entire poetic' that competed with other visual displays of theocratic rule. The marking of the victim's body signifies the power that punishes. 'In the 'excesses' of torture, a whole economy of power is invested'. In her excesses, the mystic becomes at once both torturer and victim. This, it seems to me, is the whole point. The mystic's pain - her inflicting of wounds upon herself - grants her the authority to speak and be heard."

<sup>31</sup> Lochrie, pp. 123-124: "Bernard's vision of the *imitatio Christi* means a binding of the *affectus cordis*, 'the affection of the heart,' in a carnal love that is purified of fleshly habits: 'to love with the whole heart means to put the love of his sacred humanity before everything that tempts us, from within or without. Such a love not only restores the resemblance to God in the soul, but it consoles the soul in her exile. Due to the Fall, the soul forever inhabits a *regio dissimilitudinis*. . . . If woman occupies the region of deformed dissimilarity. . . ."

Nella dolorosa “fase notturna” (Bergamo 34) dell’itinerario mistico l’eccesso di platealità avvelena l’atmosfera del convento, innesca il meccanismo ambiguo del rapporto vittima/carnefice (Girard 21-28). È una “maestra” (c. 145 r.) che in particolare infierisce su Domitilla:

Mi comandò una volta che andassi a’ luoghi comuni [latrine] e ivi pigliassi con la bocca il panno che più sporco vi fusse [e] glie lo portassi. Un’altra volta che li dimandai in secreto un cilicio, ella mi cavò l’abito, isse [sic] il mantello e mi messe il cilicio sopra l’abito [e] in tal modo mi mandò a far la colpa in mezzo al refettorio. . . . Mi comandò che mi spoliassi l’abito e li andassi innanzi solo vestita di questo cilicio. Io con la mia allegrezza lo feci, ora però mi pare che non fossi tenuta in ciò ad obbedirla, parendomi quasi contro la modestia virginal e religiosa, non avendo quel cilicio alcuna forma di abito, essendo cortissimo e senza maniche. Andai innanzi poco meno che come il mio bon Giesù in croce, per il cui amore patii quella confusione; . . . ed essendomi coperta alla meglio con proprii veli del capo, li quali, mentre me ne stavo prostrata a’ suoi piedi, ella tentò levarmeli. Io tremavo ed ero tutta fredda di gran rispetto, ma allegra di patire, per il che ella . . . era risoluta a flagellarmi. . . . Molte volte mi fece mangiare in terra, in mezzo al refettorio; e voleva che lasciassi mangiare il gatto nella minestra in mia compagnia, anzi [sic] che lo invitassi e [gli] facessi leccare quello che avevo a mangiare. Mi faceva, conforme il [sic] mio desiderio, rinfacciare dalle altre novizie i miei difetti, sputar in faccia e dar delle mortificazioni, come farmi distender in terra e che esse mi mettessero li piedi sopra la bocca, dicendomi sopra: “Inutile religiosa! . . .”

(cc. 145 v., 146 r. e v.; 147 r. e v.)

Gradualmente viene maturando nella prona novizia l’intuizione della pericolosità e dell’inutilità dell’esibizione. Inizia una nuova “fatica spirituale” per la “povera anima” che lascia le “cattive inclinazioni” (155 v., 156 r.). Dopo il superamento della fase masochistica la solitudine si rivela come l’ultima e la più efficace delle discipline per divenire l’appropriata “stanza” (c. 197 r.) del divino:

Ricevei da questo lume un arretiramento interno che avrei sempre voluto esser sola. . . . Sicché, per non sentire quell’angoscia, alle volte non v’era sorte di mortificazioni e penitenze che non facessi, pensando che il Signore si saria contentato di quelle afflizioni. . . . Ma niente mi giovava; e sempre mi è restato questo martirio; e allora, mentre stavo alla presenza della maestra . . . con tanta pena, mi sentivo raccordar nel cuore quelle amorse parole che mi disse l’amato Sposo, cioè: “Ti voglio sola e tutta occupata in me”. . . . Quanto più vado innanzi più . . . sento e ho accesa brama di un deserto e posto grande. . . . Spesso con questo piango e dico con David: “. . . *et manebo in solitudine*”.

(c. 154 r. e v.; 170 v.)



Domitilla abbandona la natura terrestre dell'accadimento, diviene sorda agli eventi del microcosmo conventuale, s'inabissa nell'"Egli' senza volto" che è disceso dalla "vertigine delle lontananze" (Blanchot 15, 17) e si svela ora sotto mutevoli spoglie:

Vedendo [che] quello che vostra reverenza m'insegnava ne' suoi esercizi era conforme [a] quello che il Signore mi donava e metteva nel cuore, perché l'amor mio mi tirava a star sempre dentro di me e ragionar con lui e parlar di lui, . . . li suoi esercizi a questo tiravano, dandomi diversi modi di tener in me la presenza di Dio, ora accomodarlo nel tabernacolo del mio cuore ed ivi trattenermi come adorando nel Santissimo Sacramento con amorosi saluti, ora come bambino nel cuscino del mio cuore farlo riposare, . . . ora crucifisso che dalle sue santissime piaghe piovesse in me sangue per lavarmi da' miei peccati.

( cc.156 v., 157 r.)

Nella reclusione e nel silenzio, veicoli dei livelli più alti di castità (Lochrie 126-127), prende forma una singolare immagine di *corpus mysticum*, suggestiva e modernissima, quasi sfiorante la junghiana nozione di *inconscio collettivo*:<sup>32</sup>

. . . desideravo d'aver tutti li sentimenti, tutte le potenze, memorie, intelletto e volontà; e così di tutte le creature che sono, sono state e che saranno. . . . Desideravo . . . aver tutti i corpi di tutte le creature, per darmi con tutti al martirio, per amor del mio Signore.

(c.173 r. e v.)<sup>33</sup>

In tale stato di isolamento e d'esaltazione il lato oscuro della psiche trova, ancora una volta, il suo libero sbocco; si scatenano visioni d'ombra; ed è ancora una volta il corpo che *parla*, con tipico gusto barocco, attraverso la brutalità del centauro, la mobilità della strega, l'esibita nudità degli uomini:

Il demonio m' assaliva con travaliosi spettacoli ora in forma d'orribili bestie, di mezz'uomo [e] mezzo cavallo, che pareva la sua grandezza empisse tutta la cella. . . . Seguitò venirmi a travaliar molti giorni in diverse forme orribilissime, ora di bestie, ora di bruttissima strega, vecchia e trista, che pareva mi volesse far intorno delle sue stregarie, ora in forma di bruttissimi omini nudi che spasseggiavano per la cella. La qual vista m'era di maggior pena che tutte le altre.

<sup>32</sup> Ulanov, p. 35: "The contents of the collective unconscious are the archetypes expressed in mythological motifs and primordial images; the contents of the personal unconscious are repressed memories, subliminal perceptions, and complexes."

<sup>33</sup> "Desideravo aver tutti gli cuori di tutte le creature del mondo, di tutti gli uccelli, delli pesci e di tutti gli animali della terra e di tutti avrei voluto fussero stati cori de' Serafini per amar il mio amabilissimo Dio" (c. 150 v.).

(c.179 r. e v.)

I due linguaggi della mistica femminile, quello abietto e quello tradizionale, si intrecciano inestricabilmente (Lochrie 129), insieme ai sintomi del “povero corpo nel suo tremore e affanno” (cc. 194 v., 195 r.). Nello stesso attimo in cui Domitilla si autodefinisce “meretrice dell’amor proprio” (c. 198 v.), “adulterina”, “indegnissima d’esser sposo [sic] del mio dolcissimo amore”, “peggiore della feccia dell’inferno” (c. 199 r.), riesce a creare immagini di estrema delicatezza, in cui il Cristo crocifisso, secondo quanto scrive Walker Bynum, “accessible and tender, . . . who bleeds and suffers” (133), diviene madre consolatrice:

Mi restò tal confidenza nell’amabilissimo Sposo mio che a lui ricorretti come bambina nelle braccia della cara madre. . . . Onde prima che scrivere alcuna cosa ogni volta mi prostravo con la faccia in terra con molte lagrime [e] supplicavo Sua Maestà [che] mi facesse da madre.

(cc. 215 r., 383 v., 384 r.)

Tale figurazione, che non è nuova all’immaginario mistico altomedievale,<sup>34</sup> si connota in Domitilla di accenti personali, ricollegabili al “luoghetto” della sua fanciullezza: il *nascondersi*, la ricerca dello spazio chiuso e protettivo. A questo tema si allaccia quello del corpo come area sacra, chiusa e “sigillata” (Lochrie 124-125), svolto con un gusto peculiarmente barocco. Il prototipo dell’ “eroina della verginità” (Tibbetts Schulenburg 41) oscilla tra la figura della *sponsa Christi* e quella della Veronica:

"Amor mio, non son io la vostra sposa ancorché indegnissima? . . . e fate grazia a me star qui con voi, insegnatemi, ben mio, ciò [che] debbo fare per darvi gusto e sollevamento in tante angosce ne' quali [sic] è posta la vostra santissima umanità". A questo rispose il Sommo Bene: "Figliola, son gravami del dono della verginità che io ho posto in te; l'ho conservata illesa e intatta da tutto quello che la può macchiare; e questo sarà il candido sudario che m'asciugherai la faccia".

(cc. 218 v., 219 r.)

Il tema, oltre che al personale *spazio-corpo*, si connette direttamente al mistero dell’Incarnazione e segue ancora una volta l’*iter* ideologico in base al quale la verginità mariana diviene la *tunica humanitatis* di Cristo, il mezzo con cui egli è

<sup>34</sup> Bynum, pp.134, 151, 145: “For a theology that maintained — over against Cathar dualism — the goodness of creation in all its physicality, a God who is mother and womb as well as father and animator, could be a more sweeping and convincing image of creation than a father God alone. . .

Thus the most frequent meaning of mother — Jesus to twelfth century Cistercians is compassion, nurturing, and union. . . . Bernard links receptivity to the ‘mothering’ of Jesus with renunciation of earthly mothers. The passage from letter 322 . . . continues: ‘He [Christ] will be your mother. . . .’”

stato provveduto di carne monda dal peccato.<sup>35</sup> È nell'ambito di tale contesto che si struttura uno dei nuclei dell'universo domitilliano: la visione/ incontro col Cristo prenatale:

. . . Allora il mio dolce bontà [sic] con affetto giocondissimo mi disse che subito che fu conceputo fu l'omo perfettissimo, attissimo ad operare virtuosamente. . . . E mi disse così: "Subito che io vidi il ponto determinato, me ne discesi nel materno ventre. Tal fu la mia obbedienza pronta e congiunta, che fu l'anima al corpo e unita la grandezza di mia divinità a quell'umanità. . . . Io m'esercitavo in tutti li atti di carità, d'umiltà, di fatiche, digiuni in che s'esercitava la mia santissima madre; . . . pigliavo sopra di me tutti [i] suoi incomodi a ciò ch'ella non patisse. Quando ella aveva qualche travaglio, io m'accostavo al suo benedetto cuore e dolcemente l'ascoltavo, empiendola d'ogni dolcezza; mi mortificavo non movendo il mio corpicino per non arrecar fastidio alla mia dolcissima e carissima madre.

(cc. 245 r. e v.; 246 r.)

L'attrazione per il Cristo-bimbo s'intesse di un desiderio di discesa alle "*cryptes maternelles*"; diviene esplorazione del "paradiso prima del tempo", regressione talassale (Mourier-Casile 156, 252):

Mentre, dunque, li rendevo tal grazia, Sua Dolcissima Bontà mi condusse in una gran luce dove soavemente mi fece invito, non mai meritato dalla mia meschinità, viltà e gran miseria, dicendo: "Vieni a me, diletta mia". E così in un subito mi tirò seco nel sacramentato ventre della Santissima Madre e mi mostrò quello che elli fece quando volse nascere, cioè render grazie al Padre della pura stanza che li aveva dato in quei nove mesi; ringraziò e chiedé santissima benedizione a tutti li membri, sangue e tutti l'interiori e esteriori del corpo della dolcissima Madre".

. . . "Mi mostrò poi il modo del suo nascimento [e] come stando nel seno del Padre s'era vestito d'umanità nel ventre della Santissima Madre, Vergine,

<sup>35</sup> Bynum, p.133: "Moreover, in medieval physiological theories — however confused they may be on the subject — the female in some sense provides the matter of the foetus, the male the life or spirit. Medieval theologians sometimes stressed that, as Eve came from the matter of Adam, so Christ came from the matter of Mary." Si senta Lochrie, pp. 117-118: "The centrality of the first two kinds of *imitatio Christi*, particularly to female spirituality, is further complicated by the medieval medical and theological alignment of the female with flesh, and the male with the spirit. Both Galenic and Aristotelian theories of conception consider the woman's contribution to the fetus to be a material one, that is, the woman provides the matter of flesh to the developing human being. This medieval conception theory carries important theological implications for the Virgin Mary's role in the incarnation of Christ and ultimately for *imitatio Christi*. The Virgin's humanity is celebrated for providing Christ with sinless flesh — the *materia* redeemed from the Fall — In Hildegard of Bingen's idea of her as *tunica humanitatis*, the 'clothing of humanity' that Christ puts on."



senza di là partirsi, e che cosa stando pure nel Padre uscì dai quei chiari chiostrì del virgineo ventre.

(cc. 370 r. e v.; 371 v.)

La “fascinazione” (Belford Ulanov 89) per l’idea della maternità acquista altissimi toni di tenerezza:

Vidi che fu prontissima la dolcissima Madre a obbedire [al]la soavissima voce dell’unico filiolo, il qual subito che lo vide, l’adorò, lo baciò, lo prese nelle sue sacratissime braccia e caramente lo strinse al santissimo petto e alla vergine faccia.

(c. 373 v.)

Al culmine di tale prospettiva si colloca la visione di Domitilla allattata al seno della Madonna:<sup>36</sup>

Non contento il Sommo Bene d’avermi dato tante sicurezze, mi fece anche assicurare dalla sua dolcissima Madre. E fu, che mentre una notte mi ritrovavo in cella facendo orazione, entrò in essa la Serenissima Signora nostra, dignissima madre dell’amabilissimo Giesù, unico amato mio, la cui bellezza e splendore riempi l’indegna anima mia di tal soavità e dolcezza che è impossibile l’esplicarlo; e, avvicinandosi a me sensibilmente, mi messe un braccio al collo e, stringendomi al suo santissimo petto, avvicinò la mia indegna bocca alla sua delicatissima poppa, dalla quale usciva il prezioso latte, dicendomi: “Ricevi, figliola, il latte è medicamento del mio unigenito figliolo Giesù, tuo dolcissimo amante. . . . [Bevi], filiola, ed abbondante succhia di questo mio latte: poichè a te mi mandò il mio dolcissimo figliolo, a ciò tu sii certa dell’opera sua”.

(cc. 410 v., 411 r. e v.; 412 r.)

Le immagini del nutrimento sono seguite da quella archetipica della *caverna* e da quella biblico-barocca del *gouffre de gloire* e *abîme de grandeur* (Bergamo 34); esse rimandano, insieme al cristallo,<sup>37</sup> alla nebulosità dell’origine, “gran mare d’amore” e di “misericordia” (c. 451 v.), che è “abisso di gloria infinita, dove c’è un gaudio tale . . . come . . . oglio sopra l’acqua” (H 91, V, c. 155 v.):<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Bynum, pp. 137, 115: “The twelfth-century Cistercians studied here felt a particular devotion to Mary as the gateway by which salvation entered the world. Gueric of Igny described his fellow monks as ‘curled up against her breast; . . . to Bernard, the maternal image is almost without exception elaborated not as giving birth or even as conceiving or sheltering in a womb but as nurturing, particularly suckling. Breasts, to Bernard, are a symbol of the pouring out towards others of affectivity or of instruction”.

<sup>37</sup> “La santa ostia [era] così chiara e risplendente come finissimo diamante. . . . Parevami che il mio capo fosse di cristallo” (c. 427 v.).

<sup>38</sup> Nel momento in cui il confessore le impedisce di andare avanti nel suo cammino estatico, Domitilla esclama, parlando a Cristo: “O Amor mio, che guerra d’amore è mai questa? Vi

[Giesú] . . . mostrandomi il suo cuore aperto, m'invitò ad intrar colà: "Entra, diletta mia, in questa caverna d'amore". . . . Fui introdotta in quell'amorosissimo abisso dove, godendo delizie tali, *quas non fiet homini loqui*, perché non si ponno esprimere, vidi e godei e intesi la bontà, amore e carità dell'amabilissimo Signore, . . . tesoro dell'anima mia. . . .

(D 77, cc. 360 r. e v., 361 r.)

È a questo punto dell'*iter* che l'intesa col confessore si muta in conflitto, appena velato; ma in ultimo, al modo di Teresa, è Domitilla che, attraverso la mediazione di Cristo, decide della propria sofferta autonomia:

Alcune volte mi venivano brame così ardenti d'unirmi con sua Maestà e darli gusto che non vi era cosa per ardua che fosse che non avessi fatto; e una fra le altre m'occorse che con tal intento affetto venni da vostra reverenza a ciò mi dicesse ciò che dovevo fare per corrispondere a quell'ardente amore, che così veemente mi chiamava; prolungò vostra reverenza il darmi risposta; il che fu a me pena più dura che morte e più penosa che l'inferno, poiché mi sentivo morire e pur vivevo in estreme pene, non trovando ciò che l'anima mia bramava. In tale affetto mi sovvenne per conforto che solo la morte mi poteva consolare, perché per unirmi perfettamente al mio Signore conveniva morire. . . . La tardanza d'adoperar li mezzi che mi parevano atti a unirmi più presto al mio Signore; il quale, vedendomi in queste pene d'amore, mi disse con amoroso affetto: "Filia, perché t'affliggi e sei mesta? Non dubitare. . . . Ti tirarò a me come mi piace".

(417 r. e v., 418 v., 419 r.)

Inizia ora la fase più profonda dei rapimenti e cresce "parimenti il desiderio di patire" (442 r.): perduta in Cristo, la mistica lo adora in un caleidoscopio luminoso di emozioni che si ripetono "d'immagine in immagine, di specchio in specchio" (de Certeau 274):

Entrata dunque in quell'attimo d'amore, godendo e amando Sua Maestà, fui ricevuta amorosamente dal mio dolce amante; il qual mi accarezzò come filia, mi amò come sposa, mi diede dilettazone in sua divinità come sua diletta e amica, mi conferì li suoi secreti dicendo: "Veni, amica mia, e [io ti] conferirò li secreti della mia infinita carità.

. . . Fui subito con Sua Maestà . . . e soavemente e strettamente unita al

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sca[c]cio per amore e voi sete così benigno che per amore e per lasciarmi obbedire . . . (cc. 292 v., 293 r.). L'immagine della *guerra* è presente anche in Surin: "Seul entre le Ciel et la Terre,/ me voyant réduit aux abois / Je souffre une terrible guerre,/ Qui me vient choquer sur ce bois" (Bergamo 36). Sulla sostanziale indipendenza delle donne mistiche si senta Irigaray, p. 202: "Her confessor will not always lend an approving ear to this, especially if he lacks experience in such things. But what does that matter, she knows that she can no longer be mistaken. It is enough to know that 'God' loves for her to live, and die."

Sommo Bene; il quale godendo amavo, amando adoravo e adorando tutta mi liquefacevo e di via più [di] riverirlo ardevo . . . nel specchio della mente.

(cc. 448 v., 464 r. e v.)

Il rapporto con Cristo diviene qui, sempre più 'a presa diretta', minimizzando, se non eludendo, la sorvegliata mediazione del confessore. La consapevolezza di Domitilla diviene autorità affrancata da ogni giudizio umano, perché garantita direttamente dallo "Sposo" con solenni accenti consacratori:

Con il che fu scolpito nell'anima mia una chiarezza e intelligenza, come [se] ciò Sua Maestà mi dicesse: "Va, diletta mia e di' al mio Christo [il confessore] che altri ch'io non può darti tal dono di conoscere, godere e amare me tuo Dio nel modo che t'ho amorosamente donato; e dilli che elli faccia un compendio di tutto quello che in te ho operato; che vedrà chiaro che la bontà mia t'ha guidato per ordine conforme alli gradi conosciuti ed esposti da' miei santi e dottori della chiesa; il che non ti guido come pellegrine [sic], ma sode e sicure [sic], sebbene tieni per particular mio dono che il grado in che ora ti ho posto è vicino all'ultimo. . . . O sposa mia, dirai da parte mia al tuo confessore che per te è venuta l'ora che il Padre mio sia adorato in spirito . . . e che tu mi godi senz'ombra di visione, né altro sensibile gusto. Dilli che questo è il grado più sicuro, lontano da ogni inganno, che maggior cosa non può concedere all'anima da me amata. . . . Poiché maggiore cosa non è concessa a' cittadini del cielo, che tal grado lo concedo alla mia diletta sposa".

(cc. 464 v., 465 r. e v.)<sup>39</sup>

La progressiva "mimesi" di cui Cristo (Lochrie 118) è garante diviene capacità di dislocazione mentale. Domitilla, ancor più di Angela da Foligno — "crocifissa dalla visione del Crocifisso" (Lochrie 135) — sperimenta l'*indiararsi*: annullata la barriera tra l'interno e l'esterno, oltrepassa il limite che separa dal sacro, trasforma il linguaggio in *corpo d'amore*, "simbolo vivente di ciò che l'anima soffre" (Lochrie 138 ); e sale essa stessa sulla croce:

trovandomi pronta ad ogni cosa, subito sentii il corpo mio indegno esser posto in modo di croce e ordinatissimamente

. . . inchiodato . . . mani e piedi, cioè primo la mano dritta, e puoi la sinistra. . . . Nell'atto di tal cosa con elevazione mi sentii tirare cosí fortemente le braccia, che pareva si disgiungessero dalle spalle e gomiti e che quasi si rompessero l'ossa; sentii gran dolore nel mezzo delle mani, come se me le avessero passate con chiodi senza punta, sì che pareva si tirassero dietro la carne e i nervi delle dita, per lo che fu veduto che si

<sup>39</sup> Per la definizione dei gradi mistici attraverso i quali l'anima accede all'unione con Dio, si veda Bergamo, pp. 64-66.



riunirno. Puoi sentii tirare così gravemente i piedi che pareva mi avessero disgiunto i fianchi e [le] ginocchia. E sentii in mezzo de' piedi il dolore come nelle mani e così gran dolore nelle coste, che mi pareva averle tutte levate dal suo luogo e tutto il corpo [era] così aggravato che ben chiaramente vedevo e gustavo quale e quanto fosse stato il patire del dolcissimo Giesú, puoi che il mio era un niente.

(G 97, cc. quarta e quinta del cap. XXI)

I sintomi incalzano sul corpo stravolto dalla metamorfosi e si dipanano in un crescendo che perturba gli spettatori: nel momento in cui il corpo di Domitilla suda e versa sangue,<sup>40</sup> la disistima delle consorelle e le perplessità del confessore si mutano in ostracismo aperto, minaccioso. Coi che si sente al più alto grado *sponsa Christi* diviene ai loro occhi prima la "falsaria" (Santa Teresa de Jesús, *La vida* 67), poi Lilith, la *donna d'ombra*;<sup>41</sup>

. . . dissi in pubblico e in privato a tutte le monache . . . che avvertissero bene a non dar credito né far stima delle cose che in me avevano vedute, perché pensavano essere diavolerie; e che essendo tali in parer di vostra reverenza, che così dovevano credere che forse avevo il demonio adosso. Onde perciò le pregavo a guardarsi di me e simili altre cose, le quali avrei voluto mi fossero state credute per desiderio di patire ogni affronto e vergogna per amor di quel Signore che tante ne ha patite per me. . . . Puoi che, per essere io giovinetta e di poca esperienza alli occhi di queste mie sorelle, non vi mancò chi dubitasse d'inganno allegando che non ero sperimentata, non avendomi esse veduta camminare come vorriano nella vita purgativa e attiva. E così ognuna diceva il suo parere all'altra, sino a tanto che mi assomigliorno a quella misera falsetta di Milano e trattorno che quel mio sangue non era sangue, ma cosa artificiosa con acqua e terra rossa. Ma questo mio contento sarebbe stato piccolo se vostra reverenza non fosse venuto all'improvviso a dirmi che mi voleva far gli esorcismi puoi che s'era determinato che il spargimento di tal sangue non poteva esser seguito se non per via di stregherie e arte magica; e che, insomma, m'era accordata con il demonio.

(G 97, cc. sesta e settima del cap. XXII)

Ma Domitilla è ormai noncurante d'ogni giudizio umano: non si sente santa ma neppure simulacro della "*simia Dei*"; è ormai immersa in un macrocosmo

<sup>40</sup> "... Fu sempre eccesso mentale, eccetto il venerdì santo. . . . La forza dell'amore che verso il dolce Cristo in me si dilatò, . . . fece uscir da tutta la mia vita non so se debbo dir sudor di sangue o umore sanguigno. . . ." "Gettavo tanto sangue per bocca; . . . mi dà minor dolore a uscire per bocca che non faceva quando tal sangue usciva dal petto" (G 97 c. seconda del capitolo VI; H 91, V, cc. 184 v., 185 r.).

<sup>41</sup> Per la tradizione ebraica pseudo-biblica che considera Lilith prima moglie di Adamo e poi concubina del diavolo si veda Markale, pp. 215-217.

radiante di gioia, nella "blancura suave"<sup>42</sup> del "giardino d'amore" (de Certeau 274):

La vigilia della Santissima Ascensione da quelle parole dell'antifona del *Benedictus* . . . l'anima mia indegna fu innalzata con ineffabile suavità alla chiara visione e godimento dell'eterna chiarezza che ebbe l'Eterno Verbo appresso il Padre prima che il mondo fosse. La notte puoi della Santissima Ascensione . . . vidi visibilmente il Signore . . . risplendente . . . che con faccia serena a guisa di amorosissimo sposo m'invitava ad unirmi presto a lui. Non indugiando più il riceverlo, mostrandomi gran desiderio d'entrare corporalmente in me, misera e miserabile. La qual, tutta accesa del suo dolce amore, . . . il Signore mi disse un'amorosa parola; e, nel dirla, mi pare si ritirasse nella Santissima Ostia, la quale da se stessa si spiccò dalle mani di vostra reverenza ed entrò nella mia bocca con tanta fiamma d'amore e dolcezza e suavità, che il corpo restò privo di sensi.

(G 97 cc. quarta e quinta del cap. XXIV)

Le escursioni nei territori dell'*Assente* cessano per sempre nel 1629. Domitilla è "gettata" (de Certeau 228) in un totale silenzio dell'anima che non sa più come raggiungere gli oceani di luce in cui l'Amato riposa; e s'abbatte su di lei, dopo la breve fama, la proibizione "di ogni corrispondenza con l'esterno", voluta dalla chiesa di Roma.<sup>43</sup> Una sorta di doppia morte, quindi, molto più desolante di quella corporale, così tanto agognata. Resta di lei il testo che non voleva scrivere, impressionante *anatomia dell'anima*, intessuta da un *io* gioioso e umbratile, colmo di fragilità e coraggio.

Opera, questa, che non sarebbe inopportuno esumare nella sua interezza dalle terre dell'oblio per restituirla, nella sua composta dignità, al variegato universo della produzione mistica secentesca.

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<sup>42</sup> Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Libro de la vida*, p. 337: "No es resplandor [sic] que deslumbre, sino una blancura suave. . . . Es como ver una agua muy clara que corre sobre cristal. . . ."

<sup>43</sup> Pozzi, *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, p. 462: "Nel 1629 cessarono le visioni e le estasi. La fama di quelle meraviglie, uscita dalla clausura, aveva però provocato il fenomeno, comune a molte altre estatiche, di un grande traffico spirituale intorno alla suora: le scrissero senza tregua religiosi e prelati, . . . ma le scrissero soprattutto dame dell'alta aristocrazia, dai vicini ducati di Mantova e Savoia alle lontane plaghe di Spagna, Boemia, Baviera. Roma intervenne allora col solito rigore; senza emettere condanne, le proibì ogni corrispondenza con l'esterno. Così calò su di lei un silenzio non più rotto da fatti straordinari né da rumori del secolo, fino alla morte, avvenuta il 12 febbraio 1671".

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### Veronica Giuliani: scrittura e riscrittura

L'immensa produzione letteraria di Santa Veronica Giuliani conta più di ventiduemila pagine conservate presso l'archivio del monastero delle Cappuccine S. Veronica Giuliani a Città di Castello e nell'archivio vescovile (pure presso il monastero delle Cappuccine), una mole ingente di pagine che comprendono diari, relazioni autobiografiche, lettere e poesie.

Numerosi sono gli studi relativi alla vita spirituale di santa Veronica Giuliani, come lo mette in luce la bibliografia. Ma con G. Pozzi la ricerca esce dalla sfera prettamente teologica, storica o bibliografica, in quanto esamina soprattutto l'aspetto letterario delle relazioni autobiografiche (*Il "parere" autobiografico di Veronica Giuliani*). È pure su questa linea che si è svolto il mio studio che propone l'analisi del diario, in particolare del fenomeno del diario sdoppiato, come appare durante alcuni anni dell'attività diaristica della santa (*Dico e ridico e non dico niente*).

L'edizione completa del diario e delle relazioni autobiografiche, in base alla quale ho iniziato la mia ricerca, è quella di Oreste Fiorucci in cinque volumi, fondata sull'edizione di Pizzicaria.<sup>1</sup>

Nel 1987, Padre L. Iriarte e A. de Felice pubblicarono un nuovo quinto volume che raggruppa tutte le relazioni autobiografiche, inclusa quella detta di Pio IX°, frammenti inediti e le poesie. Con questo volume, i curatori intendevano mettere ordine nelle relazioni e nei frammenti pubblicati in modo poco coerente da Fiorucci, adoperando anche nuovi criteri di trascrizione più fedeli all'autografo.<sup>2</sup> Attribuendo anche al loro volume il numero V, i curatori speravano far scomparire del tutto il volume V di Fiorucci; speranza assai illusoria quando si pensa che è proprio compito della ricerca scientifica di

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<sup>1</sup> *Veronica Giuliani. Un tesoro nascosto (Diario)*, voll. I-IV; (*Frammenti e Reperti*), vol. V, a c. di P. Pizzicaria, O. Fiorucci, Città di Castello 1969-1974. La relazione detta di Pio IX° è collocata all'inizio del primo volume del diario.

<sup>2</sup> *Diario di S. Veronica Giuliani*, vol. V, a c. di L. Iriarte e A. de Felice, Città di Castello 1987. Quando mi riferirò al Vol. V di Fiorucci, indicherò la data 1974 e quando mi riferirò al vol. V di Iriarte-de Felice, indicherò l'anno 1987.

recuperare e studiare ogni documento esistente. Nel 1989 uscì il volume VI che comprende le lettere della santa, a cura di L. Iriarte e M. C. Fulvi<sup>3</sup> e nel 1991 Padre L. Iriarte pubblicò l'utilissimo volume VII che propone gli indici analitici e la bibliografia completa delle edizioni e degli studi sulla santa fino al '91.<sup>4</sup>

Questa volontà di riordinare gli scritti della Giuliani e di ritrascriverli secondo criteri filologici accettabili s'impone infatti, poiché l'edizione Fiorucci è molto insoddisfacente dal punto di vista filologico in quanto non riproduce fedelmente le parole della santa, ma le interpreta o le omette perfino, quando queste non sono giudicate degne di riproduzione, sia per motivi di brevità o d'irrelevanza contenutistica. La trascrizione stessa del testo autografo che, per il quasi analfabetismo della santa, presenta molte imperfezioni linguistiche (sintassi e ortografia), propone una modificazione linguistica assai arbitraria. Il curatore non rispetta nessuna regola di trascrizione filologica, non sembra neppure seguire un criterio preciso, se non quello di rendere il testo accessibile al lettore comune. I commenti si limitano a parafrasare o commuoversi della religiosità della santa, ma non vi si trovano commenti critici, né dal punto di vista filologico, né dal punto di vista teologico. Così pure il fenomeno del diario sdoppiato appare come fatto senza rilevanza, in quanto s'incontrano ben due testi diversi sotto la stessa data, ma distinti semplicemente dall'aggiunta *bis*. In questo modo i criteri che distinguono i due testi o sfuggono al lettore o questi deve accontentarsi della nota del curatore che ammette: "Quale fosse il motivo per cui ciò facesse, non saprei indicarlo, non avendone alcun indizio" (*Diario I*, 775, n.1).

Colpita da una curiosità frenetica e dalla volontà di capire questi fenomeni oscuri, mi recai a Città di Castello per studiare gli autografi. Grazie a questo studio, sono riuscita a capire il fenomeno del diario sdoppiato che spiegherò dopo la presentazione della vita e degli scritti della santa.

### La Vita di Santa Veronica Giuliani

Veronica Giuliani, di nome battesimale Orsola, nacque il 27 dicembre 1660 a Mercatello, nelle Marche, ultima di sette figlie di cui due morirono in età giovane. Essendo il padre comandante del presidio militare della legazione pontifica d'Urbino, la famiglia godeva d'un certo prestigio sociale.<sup>5</sup> Veronica passò un'infanzia felice e, benchè collerica e capricciosa, era adorata da tutta la famiglia. Dalle autobiografie si sa che ebbe un gusto precoce per le pratiche

<sup>3</sup> *Diario di S. Veronica Giuliani, Lettere*, vol. VI, a c. di M. C. Fulvi e L. Iriarte, ed. Porziuncola, Assisi 1989.

<sup>4</sup> *Diario di S. Veronica Giuliani, Indici analitici, Bibliografia*, vol. VII, a c. di L. Iriarte, ed. Porziuncola, Assisi 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Fr. M. da san Marino, *La famiglia di santa Veronica Giuliani*, in *Santa Veronica Giuliani, Dottore della Chiesa?* (p. 120).



religiose.<sup>6</sup> A sette anni le morì la madre. Il padre lasciò le figlie al fratello e andò prima a Parma, poi a Piacenza dove diventò alto funzionario del Duca. Due anni dopo chiamò le figlie a Piacenza dove Veronica entrò a far parte dell'ambiente mondano. Disgustata da questo stile di vita, e col desiderio crescente di farsi monaca, ritornò a Mercatello presso suo zio e a diciassette anni entrò, contro la volontà del padre, nel monastero delle Cappuccine di Città di Castello. L'ambiente del convento però fu deludente: giudicava la superiora e le consorelle meschine e indiscrete, non aveva fiducia in nessuna di loro (*Diario I*, 21). Ma ben presto, la Giuliani manifestò un'attività spirituale particolare che affascinava i confessori che la seguivano. Questa suora che sembrava stare in contatto con Dio, che aveva delle manifestazioni psicofisiche particolari, come l'anoressia, la "ritirazione dei nervi", le corse pazzesche attraverso l'orto e le salite sul pero dell'orto dal quale urlava l'invito alla conversione dei peccatori, suscitò la curiosità dei confessori, subito pronti a voler analizzare l'origine di quelle manifestazioni.

È attorno al 1690 che, per ordine del confessore, la santa dovette cominciare ad esprimersi per scritto (*Summarium*, 1117-1118), prima in forma di lettere e, dal 1693 in poi, nella forma del diario e dell'autobiografia. Questa attività durò trentacinque anni, fino a pochi mesi dalla morte di Veronica. Durante la sua attività redazionale, la santa non ebbe meno di trentanove confessori, tra ordinari e straordinari, che la seguivano, ma soprattutto quattro ebbero un ruolo importante nella direzione della scrittura diaristica e delle relazioni: sotto il regime vescovile di Mons. Eustachi, che durò fino al 1716, le imposero la redazione del diario come pure delle relazioni autobiografiche l'oratoriano Girolamo Bastianelli (confessore ordinario dal 1693 al 1694) e il suo successore Padre U. A. Cappelletti (confessore ordinario dal 1690 al 1693, dal 1694 al 1699, dal 1702 al 1711). Continuarono la direzione intrapresa Carlantonio Tassinari (confessore straordinario a partire dal 1677, ordinario dal 1700 al 1702 e ancora dal 1711 al 1725) e il gesuita G. M. Crivelli (confessore straordinario dal 1714 al 1716). Sotto il vescovo Codebò, che sostituì Mons. Eustachi nel 1716, i direttori furono C. A. Tassinari e il gesuita Giovanni Maria Crivelli per il periodo tra il 1712 e 1724, e Vincenzo Segapeli e Raniero Maria Guelfi per gli anni successivi fino al giorno della morte della santa.<sup>7</sup> Quando, a diciassette anni, Veronica entrò in convento, era quasi analfabeta. Imparò a scrivere e a leggere durante l'insegnamento in convento e tramite la pratica continua e regolare del suo diario. La sua scrittura riflette infatti la lingua orale, è priva di punteggiature e di divisioni tra le parole. Spesso la santa le divide in modo sbagliato ed evidentemente compie molti errori d'ortografia. Scriveva in fretta senza rileggere nulla: "Vi saranno di molti errori, perché io non so scrivere e poi non ho tempo di poter rileggere quello che ho scritto" (*Diario I*, 142), confessava alla fine delle

<sup>6</sup> Santa Veronica Giuliani, *Un tesoro nascosto. Diario I*, a c. di Oreste Fiorucci, Città di Castello 1969, 1-168.

<sup>7</sup> Santa Veronica Giuliani, *Esperienza e Dottrina mistica*, a c. di p. L. Iriarte, Roma 1981, 39-43.

sue redazioni. Le condizioni della stesura stessa e le motivazioni che ne stavano alla base mettono la scrittrice in una posizione particolare rispetto agli scrittori soliti: per quanto riguarda le motivazioni, la redazione della sua vita e del diario non avviene per volontà sua, ma risponde ad un ordine ricevuto dal vescovo locale o dai direttori spirituali. Non le impongono soltanto il compito di scrivere, ma ne delimitano perfino la quantità e la frequenza come pure il contenuto.<sup>8</sup> Ma quest'atto di obbedienza era un calvario per lei. Dice più volte: "Ora, mentre che scrivo, sento pena di morte per la ripugnanza che vi sento".<sup>9</sup> Riuscirà ad accettarlo quando avrà delegato l'ordine a Dio, non facendo più la volontà dei confessori, ma di Dio stesso.<sup>10</sup> A questo punto, l'atto stesso della scrittura si trova trasformato in attributo dell'esperienza mistica, in quanto l'atto mistico consiste proprio nel compiere la volontà di Dio.

A trentasette anni, il 5 aprile 1697, Veronica ricevè le stimmate che tentò di tener nascoste alla comunità. Quando vennero scoperte, la Madre Superiore la denunciò al Sant'Uffizio che prese misure severissime. La santa dovette dar prova dell'origine divina dei suoi fenomeni, poiché era sospettata di essere indemoniata. Perciò l'anno seguente fu deposta dall'incarico di maestra delle novizie e venne esclusa dalla comunità. Fino al 1704 subì violenze e trattamenti disumani da prigioniera e come se fosse indemoniata. Poi però fu rieletta maestra delle novizie, ma nel 1712 e 1716, dopo le ispezioni dell'inquisizione, venne di nuovo condannata a pene e torture durante più mesi. Tuttavia, il 5 aprile 1716, esattamente 19 anni dopo la stigmatizzazione, fu eletta abbadessa. Diresse il convento con gran senso pratico e organizzativo e intraprese lavori di restauro e di ristrutturazioni. Venne rinnovata e riconfermata nel suo incarico fino alla fine della sua vita. Morì all'età di sessantasei anni, il 9 luglio 1727. Nel 1804 fu beatificata e nel 1839 santificata.

### Le autobiografie

Sappiamo che l'Alfieri ha scritto ben due autobiografie, ma la Giuliani rappresenta un caso unico nella storia dell'autobiografia in quanto ne ha scritte cinque. Queste cinque autobiografie furono scritte a intervalli diversi tra il 1693 e il 1712, sempre per ordine di un nuovo confessore. La prima fu stesa nel 1693 per ordine del confessore Girolamo Bastianelli. Narra la vita dai tre ai diciassette anni, quando entrò in convento nel 1677 (*Diario V*, [1987], 665 ss). Nel 1699, il successore di G. Bastianelli, il Padre U. Cappelletti, diede l'ordine alla santa di redigere una seconda autobiografia che parlasse della sua vita dalla prima infanzia alla fine del primo anno di noviziato nel 1678 (*Diario V*, [1987], 688 ss). Un

<sup>8</sup> "L'obbedienza mi ha imposto che scriva giorno per giorno" (*D V*, 143), "Il Prelato, con ogni rigore, mi ha imposto lo scrivere" (*D VI*, 290).

<sup>9</sup> *Diario II*, 632; cfr. *D III*, 1108; *D V*, 176; *D I*, 63.

<sup>10</sup> "Mentre io scrivo, par di sentirmi una voce interna che mi vada dicendo: 'Descrivi tutto, perché così voglio. Sono tutte grazie e favori che io tuo Sposo ti vado facendo'" (*D I*, 502).

anno dopo, nel 1700, la santa redige per ordine del vescovo Mons. Eustachi, la terza autobiografia, narrando la sua vita dall'età di tre anni fino ai trenta anni, cioè fino al 1698, compreso il culmine della sua esperienza mistica, cioè la stigmatizzazione del 1697. Si tratta della cosiddetta relazione di Pio IX<sup>o</sup>.<sup>11</sup> La quarta autobiografia, molto più breve e sintetica, riassume in pochi episodi l'infanzia e la gioventù. La data della composizione venne fissata da Pizzicaria-Fiorucci al 1714 (*Diario V* [1974], 84 ss.; *Diario I*, 724) e recentemente, da Iriarte, al 1700, perché la santa vi menziona la sua età di quaranta anni.<sup>12</sup> L'ultima autobiografia, scritta per ordine del vescovo A. Codebò, data della fine del 1720, inizi 1721. Racconta la vita dall'infanzia fino al venerdì santo del 1697, giorno della stigmatizzazione. Ma, avendo perso la memoria, la narratrice, che prima scriveva in prima persona, delega ora la scrittura a un'altra entità che è la Madonna. Questa seconda narratrice detta alla narratrice principale gli eventi accaduti esprimendosi, come pure nel diario di quegli anni, in seconda persona, usando il pronome *tu*:

Auta questa gratia, cominciò in te il divino amore a farti altre gratie.  
Cominciò in te il desiderio di patire, e facevi qualche puerile penitenza.

(*Diario V* [1987], 732)

Qui assistiamo a un altro fenomeno del tutto nuovo nella storia dell'autobiografia, che è quello dell'uso della seconda persona, mentre finora l'istituto autobiografico conosceva soltanto l'uso della prima o della terza persona.<sup>13</sup>

Se le autobiografie partono dall'infanzia, non partono però dalla data di nascita come avviene solitamente nell'autobiografia corrente. Ogni relazione si sviluppa cronologicamente con indicazioni temporali circa l'età o il periodo corrispondente all'età, oppure indica l'anno preciso o perfino la data esatta degli eventi. Di ogni periodo della sua vita la santa seleziona singoli episodi attraverso i quali si delineano due filoni delle sue esperienze, filoni che s'intrecciano di continuo: 1. la storia personale per rapporto al mondo esterno e la strada percorsa fino all'entrata in convento; 2. la storia personale interiore per rapporto al mondo sovvrannaturale.

Sul primo filone sono elencati quegli episodi che dimostrano come fattori esterni abbiano influenzato il gusto di Veronica per le pratiche religiose: vedendo i familiari praticare la preghiera e ricevere la comunione, vedendo le sorelle prepararsi ad entrare in convento e fare le discipline e sentendole leggere la vita

<sup>11</sup> *Diario I*, 1-168. Si chiama così perché per molti anni questa relazione venne custodita presso il Papa. Il primo studioso ed editore dell'opera della Giuliani, F.B. Dausse (1884), diede a questa relazione il nome di colui che l'aveva apprezzata e custodita.

<sup>12</sup> *Diario V* (1987), 724 ss.; nota 2.

<sup>13</sup> Sull'autobiografia si consulti: Lejeune; *Annali d'italianistica* 4 (1984); *L'autobiografia. Il vissuto e il narrato*.



dei martiri, le veniva voglia di imitarli; faceva nodi nei lacci e si batteva di nascosto, si schiacciava un dito nella fessura della porta, si bruciava la mano in un braciere, si metteva davanti alle immagini devote che avevano in casa e diceva l'Ave Maria, costruiva altarini e pregava il Signore e faceva la carità dando le sue scarpette nuove a un mendicante. Più tardi, quando raggiunse il padre a Piacenza, conobbe la vita mondana, imparò a maneggiare la spada e ferì un giovanotto, andò al carnevale travestita da uomo e si fece pure corteggiare. Uno stile di vita che non le piacque a lungo, ma che la confermò nella sua volontà di farsi monaca. Seguono le narrazioni relative ai primi anni in convento, anni deprimenti, in cui descrive le cure mediche che riceveva per guarire le ferite dovute alle frequenti estasi, accenna alle corse notturne attraverso l'orto nella neve o tra le spine, all'alimentazione che rifiutava, ma che le si imponeva, all'ostilità dell'ambiente quando è inquisita dal Sant'Uffizio.

Il secondo filone, invece, narra episodi di immagini animate che dimostrano che sin dalla più piccola infanzia era dotata di una sensibilità non comune. Mentre si metteva davanti alle immagini sacre che stavano in casa, queste si animavano, Gesù si muoveva, scendeva dalle braccia della Vergine e veniva a lei; lo vedeva bere il latte della Madonna e gli offriva il suo petto per allattarlo e lui si attaccava al suo seno — e questo a solo quattro anni! Mentre coglieva fiori nell'orto, le appariva Gesù che diceva essere il vero fiore. Poi scorreva con il crocifisso che le parlava. Si tratta di fenomeni che occuparono tutta la sua attenzione durante gli anni conventuali: visioni della passione di Cristo, visioni di Gesù che le si manifestava nel cuore, comunicazioni col Signore ecc.

Nel suo studio sulle cinque autobiografie, *Il "parere" autobiografico di Veronica Giuliani*, G. Pozzi le percorre sinotticamente e ne analizza le varianti, dimostrando come l'ottica della scrittrice su di sé non si modifichi lungo gli anni, ma che si accentua nel riconoscersi via via uguale a se stessa, cioè nella consapevolezza di esser stata posseduta o mossa sin dall'infanzia da un Alter-Ego che è Dio.

Se l'autobiografia spirituale è caratterizzata dal racconto di una conversione, qui si verifica una rottura dell'istituto autobiografico spirituale, in quanto la modificazione del soggetto non avviene tramite una conversione, ma una presa di coscienza circa le motivazioni che condizionavano i suoi atteggiamenti nell'infanzia, nella gioventù e nell'età matura.

## Il diario

Il diario inizia nel 1693, contemporaneamente alla prima autobiografia. Ma non è scritto sempre quotidianamente. A volte riassume le esperienze di due o tre giorni, soprattutto nel periodo seicentesco, e nel Settecento gli intervalli si fanno più larghi, rimangono vuoti anche di tre mesi. Riprendendo la scrittura, la redattrice seleziona alcune giornate particolari fra i mesi tralasciati, le quali vengono descritte retrospettivamente. Le giornate possono essere descritte con racconti dettagliati, come possono anche essere semplicemente riassunte con una

frase di tipo: “l’ho passata come al solito”, “fu uno di quei giorni preziosi”, “vi fu qualche modo stravagante, ma non so raccontarlo”. Il diario parla esclusivamente dell’esperienza mistica e dei fenomeni che l’accompagnano. Racconta i rapimenti, le comunicazioni divine, le visioni e analizza gli effetti interiori e fisici che ne derivano, racconta gli effetti prodotti sul comportamento, le penitenze, le meditazioni che stanno alla base della pratica. Non mancano tuttavia le descrizioni di tormenti interiori, di persecuzioni del demonio e di vari tentatori, e di malattie. I fatti del mondo esterno, invece, come le elezioni all’abbadessato e le persecuzioni del Sant’Uffizio, sono integrati nella sfera divina; cioè è sempre tramite i discorsi col Signore che si vengono a conoscere fatti esterni.

Propongo, qui di seguito, una breve presentazione del percorso mistico della Giuliani.

Se l’epifania divina si manifesta improvvisamente, il raggiungimento della meta suprema, cioè l’unione mistica, designata anche con nozze mistiche, è sempre accompagnato da un’evoluzione e da una metamorfosi del soggetto che vive l’esperienza, fino al suo annullamento in Dio. Siccome Dio è l’Essere puro e il Tutto in assoluto, per rapporto ad Esso, l’io si riconosce nel Non-Essere e nel Niente. Da qui deriva una conoscenza di sé nella forma del Nulla. In questo processo, l’io che si lascia invadere dall’Altro deve spogliarsi di ogni potere umano, cioè dell’intelletto, della volontà e della memoria. La presa di coscienza del non-essere e dell’essere niente ricorre tantissime volte nel diario:

In un subito comprendo il mio nulla; e più lo penetro, e più gusto sento di essere niente, di non potere niente, di non volere niente, ma solo godere che Iddio sia ogni bene, e bene infinito.

*(Diario II, 14)*

. . . il mio nome, il mio essere è niente.

*(Diario I, 927)*

Ma spogliarsi di tutto implica anche l’annullamento della coscienza che si ha di sé, cioè del niente, in quanto essere coscienti presuppone ancora l’atto di pensare, ultimo garante dell’essere umano:

Mi trovo tutta contenta per non trovare contenti, ma anche di questo sento in un tratto spogliarmene; e provo una pace di questo spoglio. Poi d’un tratto non ho nemmeno questo. Mi fermo nella volontà di Dio e sento che mi viene levata. Non ch’io perda la volontà di Dio, ma non ho da sentire di starvi. E io m’accontento di stare nascostamente e di non conoscerla nemmeno, tutta ansiosa che Dio operi a suo volere; a me non importa saperlo. Vivo posata senza pensieri. Ma di questo ancora m’ho da spogliare. Non so cosa sia di me e non ho da pensare a me né ad altro. Sto consumandomi e non trovo chi mi consuma. È in me e non so cosa sia. Oh

che modi il non potere raccontare niente e sentire tante cose in me e non potere operare niente! Sento pene di morte, darei stridi fino alle stelle, m'entra il fuoco fra pelle e pelle. . . . Non dico altro perché tanto non dico niente.

(*Diario IV*, 563)

La santa pensa ma non afferra né l'oggetto della cognizione, né l'atto di pensare. Pozzi spiega che il pensare non muore, ma che trascorre quasi sospeso sul pensante, in quanto lo scambio di cognizioni non avviene fra Dio e l'anima, ma fra Dio e Dio nell'anima (Pozzi, *Il "parere"*, 185 ss.):

Dio parla a te in te . . . e poi risponde a sé per te, e tu . . . non conosci niente.

(*Diario IV*, 663)

Il diario mostra un'evoluzione progressiva della scissione e distruzione dell'io personale il quale finisce con la sua catastrofe totale. È a partire dal 1720 che la narrazione sopprime l'uso dell'io, riferendo, con una visione staccata dalla persona, ciò che avviene in essa nella forma del tu. L'ultima pagina del diario chiude con le parole seguenti:

Di tutte queste cose tu non conoscesti niente, e pure desti il consentimento a tutto secondo il volere di Dio, e restasti nel tuo annientamento. Fa punto.

(*Diario IV*, 910)

La distruzione della cognizione di sé avviene parallelamente alla distruzione della memoria che segue pure un percorso progressivo. Dal 1693 al 1720, le narrazioni sono frequentemente introdotte da formule che esprimono l'incertezza della percezione e del ricordo: "Pare a me di ricordarmi . . ." (*Diario I*, 39). Questa incertezza della memoria si estingue negli ultimi anni di vita nella sua perdita totale, ragione per cui l'io narrante delega la narrazione alla Madonna: ". . . mi metto a scrivere senza memoria di ciò che devo scrivere. Vergine SS. . . vi prego a ricordarmi quello che io devo scrivere . . ." (*Diario IV*, 713). E allora, in un primo tempo, la Madonna si mette a dettare: "Figlia, scrivi così: Io essendo in seno alla mia cara Mamma . . ." (*Diario IV*, 298). Ma pure sotto dettatura della Madonna, l'io deve annullarsi ed è così che verrà sostituito dal pronome "tu". Lo stile cambia radicalmente: il ricordo viene ordinato e il contenuto accertato in quanto non appaiono più le formule che esprimono l'incertezza o il dubbio.

Non solo le vie, ma pure i metodi del Signore sono infiniti. Infatti, Dio agisce sicuramente su ogni sua amata perché si annulli in Lui per celebrare le nozze, ma con ognuna usa metodi diversi. Angela da Foligno, per esempio, si abbandona all'amore divino dopo un lungo corteggiamento insistente da parte del Signore, altre invece provano un desiderio intenso di unirsi a Dio dopo che si è



manifestato a loro. Con Veronica, lo spotalizio viene celebrato relativamente presto, nel 1696, ma non è mai definitivo: dopo le nozze, il Signore usa togliere la fede dal dito della sposa, accertandole che dopo ulteriori trasformazioni, avrebbe rinnovato lo spotalizio. Gli spotalizi si ripetono infatti ennesime volte e nel 1701, la santa ne contava già sessanta. Perché questi lunghi anni di stato nuziale provvisorio, perché questo modo leggermente sadico e crudele da parte dell'Amato Divino che sembra attrarre e respingere, darsi senza mai darsi definitivamente, realizzare promesse per poi disfarle? Non si tratta di giudicare l'atteggiamento di quest'amante che, pur essendo apparentemente meno passionale della sposa, non è meno fedele; si tratta invece di sottolineare il procedimento singolare di questo Sposo che per nozze mistiche non sembra intendere lo spotalizio nel senso mondano, cioè di legame avvenuto tramite lo scambio degli anelli e il congiungimento, ma proprio come annullamento totale della sposa nello sposo e per far ciò ci vogliono spogliamenti continui di ogni sostanza umana. In questo senso, le nozze provvisorie fanno parte di un piano didattico divino che permette alla sposa non solo di assaggiare ciò che le spetterà nella totalità finale, ma pure di rendersi conto come ogni nuova tappa suscita stati di beatitudine più intensi. Gli innumerevoli spotalizi con scambio della fede, dunque, non confermano altro che le tappe progressive raggiunte dall'anima nell'itinerario evolutivo verso l'annullamento eterno. Dio non si presenta alla Giuliani soltanto come amante raffinato, ma anche e soprattutto come maestro ed insegnante dotato di grande sensibilità pedagogica. Non abbandona l'allieva finché questa non abbia imparato le lezioni della sua *ars amandi*.<sup>14</sup>

È nel 1697 che Dio comincia a manifestarsi sotto l'aspetto di maestro, annunciando di voler introdurre l'amata nella sua scuola per modificarla in modo tale da poterla considerare degna di chiamarla sposa sua. Mi soffermo su quest'aspetto dell'*ars amandi* divina, perché è proprio durante il periodo tra gennaio e marzo 1697 che appare per la prima volta, in modo continuo, questo fenomeno curioso del diario sdoppiato. Lo si incontra in modo singolare già nel 1695 e, dopo i tre mesi consecutivi del 1697, di nuovo tra il 1714 e il 1717.

Con diario sdoppiato intendo quel fenomeno che presenta due redazioni diverse d'una stessa giornata. Consultando gli autografi, si capisce che la santa scriveva il suo diario su singoli fascicoli di vario spessore, che riconsegnava al confessore appena giunta all'ultimo foglio. Quando il diario è sdoppiato, troviamo due fascicoli distinti che portano ciascuno la stessa data, ma con narrazioni diverse. Sono i testi di quei due fascicoli che, nell'edizione Fiorucci, appaiono sotto la stessa data, ma separati da un *bis*.

Percorrendo le doppie redazioni, queste si dividono in due gruppi principali: il primo gruppo comprende gli scritti del Seicento che appaiono in due versioni

<sup>14</sup> "O Dio! Io mi vedo posta in questa scuola e vi trovo lavoro che mi fa tremare" (*Diario I*, 782); "Stavo come ad una scuola: sentivami apprendere tutto . . . , ma molte cose non le posso descrivere" (*Diario I*, 772).

secondo un criterio di selezione tematica, redatte per ordine d'un solo destinatario. Il secondo gruppo comprende le doppie redazioni del Settecento, scritte non più per ordine d'un solo destinatario, ma di due o perfino tre. Non vi sono differenze sostanziali tra le varie versioni.

Dal confronto dei due diari paralleli, scritti nel Seicento, risulta che il confessore di allora faceva scrivere alla santa certi eventi su un fascicolo separato per distinguere le manifestazioni divine, caratteristiche dell'iniziazione e dell'evoluzione del soggetto sulla via dell'unione mistica, da quelle che erano di tipo fisiologico e psicologico. L'interesse del confessore non era solo quello di raggruppare le esperienze propriamente mistiche su fascicoli separati, ma, analogamente ai metodi adottati dai nostri psichiatri moderni, ordinava alla scrittrice di redigere di getto e senza rilettura per cogliere e capire meglio l'origine e l'autenticità di questi fenomeni irrazionali.

Durante i tre anni seicenteschi di doppia redazione (1695-1697), si delinea un percorso mistico che si svolge su due filoni.

Il primo riflette i fenomeni psicofisici che nel 1695 e 1696 si manifestano con un atteggiamento attivo da parte della santa, la quale aspira alla mortificazione dei sensi. Questa viene raggiunta tramite pratiche di digiuno e di penitenze violente. Queste pratiche venivano descritte su fogli separati dal diario regolare e chiamati dalla santa "I fogli dei mancamenti dell'umanità". Nel 1697 i fenomeni fisici si manifesteranno in seguito a un atteggiamento passivo della santa, cioè con l'annientamento fino alla stigmatizzazione. Pur essendo anche alla base dei fenomeni fisici, in quanto è Dio che motiva la santa a praticare le mortificazioni, il filone spirituale rimane celato durante i primi due anni. Il digiuno, le mortificazioni e le penitenze erano azioni praticate dall'io su se stesso, in base agli ordini ricevuti da Dio. Il terzo anno, le stimmate appaiono non più tramite l'azione diretta dell'io, ma tramite quella di Dio, il quale agisce sull'io che vi partecipa passivamente, come dimostrano gli esempi citati sopra. Così i fenomeni psicofisici culminano nel '97 nella stigmatizzazione del 5 aprile.

Il secondo filone riflette il percorso spirituale e si sviluppa parallelamente all'evoluzione dei fenomeni fisici. È la storia dell'io che evolve, tramite la scissione, da uno stato di io a uno stato di non-io, in quanto l'io si annulla in Dio. Giungerà al suo culmine, pure nel 1697, con lo spotalizio del 7 aprile.

Nel 1695 e '96, l'io è pure scisso, ma in un io umano ed altruista che lotta contro un io sensuale ed egoista, cioè è diviso in un io-agente ed in un altro che viene disciplinato ad essere paziente del primo. Nel '97, avendo mortificato l'ego, l'io agente dei due anni precedenti assume il ruolo di paziente in quanto si sottomette alle azioni di Dio, ossia d'un Alter-Ego che è l'io amante e spirituale. L'io agito da Dio giungerà, tramite la partecipazione passiva, all'annullamento di sé e a trasformarsi in Dio per riconoscersi nella forma del nulla.

La dialettica di questo io che si modifica passando allo stato di non-io si rispecchia proprio nella forma stessa del diario: l'analogia si lascia dimostrare a

partire dall'evolouzione dei tre primi mesi del 1697 che formano il ciclo culminante dell'esperienza, durante il quale si ripete la struttura del doppio diario dei tre anni seicenteschi (1695, '96, '97): i primi tre mesi del 1697, infatti, l'io si divide in un io e in un non-io; quest'ultimo opera ad eliminare il primo. Il 31 marzo, con la "confessione generale davanti a Gesù", si chiude la tappa della scissione dell'io, in quanto viene avviato verso l'unione, raggiunta coll'unione nuziale il 7 aprile. Quanto alla forma del diario, questa è integra fino al 17 gennaio; da quella data fino alla fine del mese di marzo, il diario si trova sdoppiato in un diario che riferisce le esperienze naturali e psicologiche d'un io comune e in un altro diario che riferisce le esperienze d'un io extrasensoriale. I testi del secondo diario prendono un'ampiezza tale che le narrazioni del primo diario si riducono a poche frasi riassuntive e poco significative. Analogamente all'evoluzione dell'io, il diario rimane diviso fino alla fine di marzo. In aprile, il secondo diario elimina il primo, integrando quest'ultimo nella sua forma unitaria. Leggendo soltanto il primo registro del diario sdoppiato, si constata che la sostanza narrativa si limita alla sfera dei sensi e che evoca episodi appartenenti alla sfera naturale delle esperienze quotidiane, come le penitenze praticate, le lotte contro gli influssi satanici, le corse per l'orto. Il secondo diario, invece, presenta una sostanza narrativa molto più ricca. Si svolge unicamente nella sfera extrasensoriale e contiene tutto il percorso dell'io che si trova alla scuola divina. Si tratta delle esperienze più propriamente mistiche, in particolare delle comunicazioni divine, che non sono più messaggi verbali, ma trasmessi durante i rapimenti che avvengono nei rapimenti:

Ed in queste quattro parole che io ho detto, pare a me di aver detto tutto sproposito, e nemmeno vi ho accennato pure un tantino a quello che si prova in quel secondo rapimento. Perché del primo, quando Iddio solleva tutto in Lui, va bene, e tutto si può raccontare; ma, quando l'anima si trova in questi rapimenti, e nel medesimo rapimento se ne sente un altro tutto superiore al primo, ella [l'anima] non può capire se Iddio si è comunicato tutto ad essa, oppure se ha tirato tutta essa in lui. E quello che ella prova in questo non si può descrivere. Meglio tacere che dire.

(*Diario I*, 207)<sup>15</sup>

Durante i primi mesi dell'anno '97, i "fogli delle comunicazioni", come la santa usava definire il secondo diario, comprendono tutti i fenomeni spirituali e soprannaturali ai quali le comunicazioni divine sono legate. Si tratta di visioni, di operazioni divine e delle modificazioni dell'io che segue gli insegnamenti del Signore alla scuola dell'*ars amandi*.

Ora ci si può chiedere come il confessore fosse capace di dare sempre al momento opportuno il secondo fascicolo alla santa, perché vi descrivesse le sue esperienze particolari. O era il fatto di ricevere un secondo quadernetto a questo

<sup>15</sup> Su questo argomento, Courbat 94 ss.



scopo eventuale che motivò la santa a vivere queste esperienze? Analizzando i testi del diario unitario che precedono lo sdoppiamento della narrazione, si nota che il Signore usava avvertire la santa qualche giorno prima delle nuove tappe che avrebbe dovuto percorrere. È dunque in base a quegli annunci riferiti dalla santa, che il confessore riusciva a fornire la carta supplementare.

I casi del Settecento sono del tutto diversi.

Nel 1715 il vescovo aveva chiesto al confessore straordinario, il gesuita Padre Crivelli, di venire ad ispezionare la santa. Questi usava metodi assai duri e rudi e non era per niente amato dalla santa. In modo assai significativo, essa lo chiamava "l'Indiano". Durante la sua presenza nel 1715 e ancora nel 1716, la santa dovette redigere il diario per lui, a volte anche per il Prelato e pure per il confessore ordinario, Padre Tassinari, col quale però la santa intratteneva rapporti molto affettivi. Il diario di quegli anni non è più *sdoppiato* secondo un criterio di selezione tematica, ma è piuttosto *raddoppiato*, in quanto la santa scriveva per tutti i suoi destinatari le stesse esperienze, ma con alcune differenze stilistiche, a seconda del destinatario: quando scrive per il direttore spirituale che tende a condannarla, redige nel modo più distanziato e meno personale possibile; quando scrive per il confessore che sente vicino non solo spiritualmente, ma pure umanamente, scrive più personalmente e più sinceramente. Siccome il confessore gesuita non si accontentava di redazioni sporadiche, spesso chiedeva alla santa di descrivere retrospettivamente e con applicazione le giornate mancanti. Tutto questo lavoro superava le forze della santa che dovette finalmente chiedere a una sua consorella di copiare il diario e di mandare la copia al confessore ordinario. Durante gli anni '20, la scrittura raddoppiata continua per alcuni anni, perché il confessore ordinario, il Padre Tassinari, era spesso infermo per malattia. Egli allora chiedeva ai suoi colleghi di sostituirlo, di modo che la santa dovette redigere per il confessore in nomina e ancora una volta per il confessore infermo.

### La redazione

Per quanto riguarda la questione su come e quando la santa scriveva, si sa, da dichiarazioni sue, che scriveva quasi sempre di notte: "La notte scrivo delle volte più di due ore et il giorno non ho tempo" (*Diario VI*, 320). Di notte, la santa non scriveva soltanto il diario delle esperienze quotidiane, ma pure quello legato alle ferite settimanali del cuore che redigeva subito col sangue della ferita su un altro foglio separato. Accanto al diario e ai fogli scritti col sangue, scriveva ancora lettere ai vari confessori e, durante certi anni, pure relazioni autobiografiche. Non va dimenticato che una gran parte dei rapimenti avveniva pure di notte e che spesso la scrittrice era costretta ad interrompere la scrittura perché veniva assalita dai demoni.<sup>16</sup> La santa afferma inoltre che a volte non

<sup>16</sup> "Non dico altro, perché non mi lasciano in pace: mi sono rizzata più di 20 volte", *D VI*, 298.

interrompeva nemmeno la redazione quando veniva rapita.<sup>17</sup> Scriveva il suo diario sui fogli ricevuti di volta in volta in quantità limitata, che nel Seicento variava da due a dodici fogli alla volta. Sempre dalle dichiarazioni della santa, sappiamo che, prima di redigere le sue esperienze, le riferiva oralmente al confessore. Poi le scriveva sui suoi fogli e, una volta riempito il fascicolo, lo consegnava al confessore, il quale sembra che leggesse attentamente gli episodi narrati. E quando questi si accorgeva che mancava un evento riferitogli oralmente dalla santa, chiedeva alla scrittrice di scriverlo retrospettivamente. Spesso questi episodi non venivano datati dalla scrittrice o portavano la data del giorno della scrittura. La santa li aggiungeva al diario quotidiano che stava redigendo — separandoli con delle righe dalle narrazioni del diario — introducendo i testi ricordati con una formula del ricordo o con qualche indicazione circa il periodo dell'evento.

La Giuliani usava iniziare i suoi fascicoli con la data completa, cioè giorno, mese e anno. Riempiva i fogli fino in fondo, badando tuttavia a giungere al termine del fascicolo con la narrazione d'una giornata completa. Così, quando si accorgeva che non vi era abbastanza spazio per una nuova giornata, lasciava in bianco da due righe a una pagina e mezzo. Poteva pure capitare il caso contrario, cioè che le mancasse la carta.<sup>18</sup> Allora organizzava la sua redazione in modo da giungere al termine del racconto, finendo la frase sul margine verticale dell'ultimo foglio.

Quanto alle redazioni binarie si constata dagli autografi che la santa scriveva a volte prima sul diario, altre volte invece prima sul fascicolo dei temi selezionati. Il cambiamento di registro dipendeva fortemente dalle condizioni di carta a disposizione e dall'ordine in cui riceveva i fascicoli. Giunta per esempio alla fine del mese e, non possedendo un nuovo fascicolo per la continuazione del diario, cambiava registro, scrivendo le ultime narrazioni del mese sui fogli riservati alle esperienze propriamente mistiche, o viceversa. Solo raramente redigeva i due registri di seguito perché, oltre ad essere condizionata dalla carta, dipendeva pure dalle sue condizioni psicofisiche e mentali: cioè dai rapimenti che si accumulavano a volte fino a tre di seguito, e di fantasmi che le impedivano di redigere metodicamente, cosicché si trovava a dover adattare il suo ritmo a queste condizioni. Non avendo tempo di rileggersi, non poteva tener sempre in mente ciò che aveva già narrato e ciò che doveva ancora scrivere. Perciò inventò il suo proprio metodo per segnalare, con righe di separazione tra due testi, il cambiamento di registro e il passaggio da una redazione posteriore a una redazione presente. In base a queste righe, la scrittrice riusciva ad orientarsi e

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<sup>17</sup> "Ho scritto, in un tratto; non so come abbia fatto; non so se sono in me, o fuori di me; mi sento tutta in Dio", *D II*, 1297; "mentre ho descritto tutti questi miracoli della provvidenza di Dio, io sono stata fuori di me, per due ore", *D II*, 231.

<sup>18</sup> "Non ho più carta", *D IV*, 206; "Penso sarà oggi l'ultima volta che scrivo: non ho carta, pensi V.P.: se non ho carta come ho da fare?", *D VI*, 258.

ritrovare rapidamente il filo della redazione. Se è vero che nel Seicento ricevette un fascicolo alla volta, nel Settecento ne riceveva spesso più di uno alla volta, una quantità che doveva bastare per un mese intero. Alla fine del mese li consegnava tutti insieme al confessore. Per non confondere tutti i fogli che si erano accumulati durante un mese, la santa inventava segni che riempiono una gamma variata che va dalla croce semplice alla croce combinata con puntini o righe, fino alla spirale. Giunta alla fine di un fascicolo, poneva uno di questi segni in fondo all'ultima pagina a destra. Lo stesso segno veniva ripetuto in fondo a sinistra della prima pagina del nuovo fascicolo, cosicché i due segni s'incontravano simmetricamente. Con questo metodo, la santa riusciva a consegnare al confessore i fascicoli in ordine cronologico.

Tutte queste condizioni e limitazioni imposte dai confessori e dalla carta non formavano altro che il paradosso parallelo alle condizioni dell'esperienza mistica stessa. Mi spiego: circa la redazione, la scrittrice veniva condizionata in modo tale che ciò che non voleva dire (cioè la sua esperienza intima intera, dato che la scriveva "per obbedienza" e "con ripugnanza") lo doveva scrivere per costrizione delle autorità ecclesiastiche, e ciò che tentava di riferire, non lo poteva scrivere per mancanza di carta e di tempo. Ora, l'esperienza mistica stessa implica lo stesso paradosso, poiché ciò che si vorrebbe dire, non lo si può dire a causa della limitazione del linguaggio umano e ciò che si dice in modo fluviale, non corrisponde al vissuto. Il tentativo di riferire e di redigere un'esperienza ineffabile e quindi inesprimibile, non può che essere limitato e condizionato dal fatto di essere una scrittrice umana: "Dico e ridico e non dico niente" (*D II*, 608) è proprio il Leitmotiv del diario.

La Giuliani scrive dunque durante trentacinque anni la stessa storia che si ripete ciclicamente. Ma il diario mistico finisce di solito con il raggiungimento del punto supremo che è l'unione nuziale. Ripetendo il percorso dell'unione mistica ennesime volte fino a pochi mesi dalla morte, la Giuliani si presenta come caso eccezionale nella storia del diario spirituale. Non è una scrittrice particolare soltanto nel campo della mistica, è un caso unico anche nella storia letteraria per quanto riguarda i generi del diario e dell'autobiografia. Per queste modificazioni che lei apporta alla storia dei generi letterari, Veronica Giuliani deve essere considerata una scrittrice rivoluzionaria. E l'esperienza stessa descritta da lei con sdoppiamenti della personalità, fino a riconoscersi sia nel pronome *io* che nel pronome *tu*, potrebbe trasformare la scrittrice perfino in una precorritrice e realizzatrice del "Je est un autre" rimbaldiano.

In conclusione e per riprendere il discorso iniziale circa le edizioni degli scritti della Giuliani, sostengo il progetto di una nuova edizione<sup>19</sup> che, oltre a riprodurre gli autografi secondo regole filologiche della trascrizione, dovrà pure tener conto del doppio diario ponendo le due redazioni datate lo stesso giorno una accanto all'altra, perché il lettore possa seguire di continuo il percorso di sua

<sup>19</sup> Già in corso dal 1994, iniziata da un gruppo di studiosi italiani e svizzeri.



scelta, cioè, o quello mistico o quello psicofisico. Ogni percorso dovrà essere commentato perché il lettore possa capire le intenzioni e gli interventi del confessore, come pure l'evoluzione che l'anima della santa subisce sul suo percorso. Perciò occorre anche un commento teologico appropriato. Siccome le edizioni attuali pongono l'accento su un commento che intende chiarire le espressioni linguistiche della santa, mi sembra che, oltre a illustrare la spiritualità della santa, si dovrebbe presentare pure l'aspetto umano di una scrittrice condizionata dai confessori, dalla quantità della carta e dai vari disturbi che impedivano un'attività redazionale metodica. Credo infatti che il gran senso organizzativo della scrittrice e gli accorgimenti personali escogitati per mettere ordine nella quantità di redazioni diverse meritino di essere valutati propriamente. In questo modo si eviterebbe di mitizzare un essere o di ridurre questa persona, che una cultura materialista stenta a capire, a una psicotica e schizofrenica. Con un commento dei due diari che valorizzi tanto l'aspetto della persona umana quanto quello spirituale, il lettore può rendersi conto che accanto alle offuscazioni mentali e alle perdite di memoria, accanto ad un io sdoppiato e ad una storia d'amore con un *Alter-Ego* divino, c'è pure un essere che ricorda, seleziona i temi con perfetta chiarezza mentale, un essere che organizza le sue redazioni con uno spiccato senso dell'ordine. Così il fenomeno mistico darà ancor più filo da torcere alla psichiatria, ma renderà più affascinante la santa al lettore curioso ed interessato.

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## Scrittura obbediente e mistica tridentina in Veronica Giuliani

In una pagina memorabile dei *Promessi sposi* Alessandro Manzoni, dopo essersi lasciato andare al piacere di raccontare i tratti “notabili” del carattere di Federico Borromeo, si spingeva ad accennare, “alla sfuggita”, ai limiti di quel carattere affermando che “d’un uomo così ammirabile in complesso, noi non pretendiamo che ogni cosa lo fosse”.<sup>1</sup> Il razionalismo illuministico della formazione giovanile spingeva il Manzoni a prendere le distanze dal cardinale scrivendo che Federico Borromeo “tenne con ferma persuasione, e sostenne in pratica, con lunga costanza, opinioni, che al giorno d’oggi parrebbero a ognuno piuttosto strane che mal fondate” (*I promessi sposi* 486).

Il Manzoni si riferiva ai pregiudizi espressi dal Borromeo, in perfetta sintonia con le credenze del secolo, contro gli untori, le streghe e gli eretici; in seguito a questi pregiudizi nei primi decenni del '600 alcuni presunti “indemoniati” con il beneplacito del cardinale vennero mandati al rogo dopo orribili torture. Il Manzoni sottolinea la responsabilità personale del Borromeo che non può essere in alcun modo giustificata dalle superstizioni e dagli errori del suo tempo.

La posizione dello scrittore diventa più problematica di fronte alla decisione del cardinale di accondiscendere alle richieste dei decurioni che chiedevano una solenne processione di popolo dietro le reliquie di San Carlo attraverso le strade cittadine allo scopo di bloccare il diffondersi della peste. Per spiegare questa nefasta decisione Manzoni si limita a rimandare ad una eventuale debolezza della volontà del cardinale e agli insondabili “misteri del cuore umano” (*I promessi sposi* 721). Come è noto, dopo la processione non ci fu il miracolo annunciato della fine della peste, ma l’aumento vertiginoso dei decessi. La descrizione del Manzoni coglie e illustra il carattere macabro di quella processione, trasformata in “spettacolo barocco” attorno al “mitrato teschio” del santo, che diviene non solo il simulacro della tragica e mortale epidemia diffusa nell’intera Europa in questo secolo, ma anche l’espressione più autentica dell’allegoria barocca che non ha più in mente la luce della redenzione e i valori eterni di una natura incontaminata,

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<sup>1</sup> Cito (p. 487) dall’edizione curata da E. Raimondi e L. Bottoni.

come ha scritto Benjamin (170). Uno storico come Maravall ha mostrato a sua volta come l'immagine del mondo e dell'uomo nella società barocca appaia fortemente caratterizzata dalla coscienza sociale della crisi. Oltre alla peste, gravi calamità affliggono l'Europa, l'instabilità e l'inquietudine sociale sono all'origine dei principali temi della cultura barocca, come il caso, l'imprevisto, il mutamento, la fugacità, la caducità, le rovine, il nulla (Maravall).

I limiti del carattere e della personalità di Federico Borromeo, quest'uomo "così ammirabile nel complesso", e i limiti della cultura del suo tempo emergono anche nell'opera che egli ha dedicato al misticismo femminile, il *De ecstaticis mulieribus et illulis. Libri quatuor* (1616), il testo attorno al quale organizzeremo il nostro approccio iniziale alla mistica del XVII secolo che, come ha mostrato Michel de Certeau, rappresenta la prima codificazione storica della mistica, termine che in questo secolo acquista il carattere di sostantivo, dopo essere servito per secoli come aggettivo riferito ad esperienze teologiche o esegetiche (De Certeau, "Mystique" au XVII siècle. Le Problème du langage 'mystique'). Analizzeremo in seguito la scrittura mistica di Veronica Giuliani, autrice di quello che è stato definito il più fantastico esempio di diario spirituale del '600 europeo, e di numerose scritture autobiografiche (David). Si è parlato a questo proposito dell'intensa spiritualità del mondo barocco, spesso nascosta sotto spoglie ingannatrici e vuote (David, p. 96), e a questo rilievo intendiamo ricollegarci nella convinzione che se è vero che il misticismo resiste a qualunque riduzione sul piano storiografico, rimane pur vero che esso è sempre un fenomeno storicamente determinato e che, per questa ragione, occorrerebbe parlare di *misticismi* al plurale, come hanno mostrato le fini indagini del compianto Mino Bergamo (*La scienza dei santi*; "Retorica mistica e codice barocco"). Da ultimo la nostra ricerca muove da una preoccupazione metodologica tesa a verificare per quanto possibile nel breve spazio di questo saggio le modalità e i limiti del rapporto mistica-letteratura.

### I. "Del misticismo vero e falso delle donne"

L'opera fu concepita a scopo didattico ad uso ecclesiastico per affrontare i problemi posti dalla presenza di millantatori e millantatrici che ingannavano il popolo attraverso il ricorso a presunte pratiche mistiche. In questo modo il libro diventa un'analisi dettagliata dei fenomeni straordinari che a ragione vengono chiamati mistici in senso proprio, per distinguerli da quelli falsamente mistici che a Federico Borromeo appaiono direttamente influenzati dal diavolo. La finalità pratica del libro, che doveva diventare uno strumento operativo per gli ecclesiastici impegnati ad affrontare il fenomeno dei millantatori, impedisce al cardinale di affrontare i temi più propriamente teologici e spirituali della mistica. Per questo motivo il libro diventa interessante per gli aspetti culturali della mistica barocca, di cui Borromeo offre un vero e proprio florilegio svolgendo le



sue dense considerazioni psicologiche e fisiologiche sui diversi tipi di estasi, rapimenti e miracoli, fino a fornire una dettagliata rassegna degli odori e dei sapori di natura soprannaturale che entrano in gioco nei fenomeni descritti.<sup>2</sup>

Il libro rimane una difesa della mistica incentrata sulla gnosi e sull'unione con la divinità concepita come una visione mentale soprannaturale e intuitiva. La mistica viene definita dal cardinale un "dono celeste" poiché offre il vantaggio di una sapienza che avvicina gli esseri umani (*Misticismo vero e falso delle donne. Libri quattro*, p. 85); ma l'interesse del cardinale è soprattutto rivolto a scongiurare i pericoli di inganni in questo ambito da parte di visionari senza scrupoli. Queste preoccupazioni appaiono motivate dal dilagare della mistica nel Seicento: le autorità pubbliche e religiose erano spaventate dal fenomeno mistico incontrollato che si accompagnava alla ripresa del profetismo, e di forme di cultura popolare, che si esprimevano nell'astrologia e nella stregoneria, a partire dagli ultimi decenni del Cinquecento. Gli storici spiegano questi fenomeni con l'emergere di problemi di varia natura nei rapporti tra chiesa e popolo; non stupisce quindi che dall'interno della chiesa si producessero manuali come quello del Borromeo atti ad affrontare le problematiche relative all'emergere di questi fenomeni incontrollati ed equivoci in un secolo che peraltro tesseva le lodi della dissimulazione e della menzogna (Villari, *Ribelli e riformatori*, pp. 85 e sgg.). In questa maniera il libro finisce per avere un'impostazione strettamente apologetica dell'esperienza mistica secentesca che viene fortemente esaltata dal cardinale prevalentemente nelle sue manifestazioni esteriori, secondo il criterio della visibilità tipico della retorica barocca (Ciaccia).

Il cardinale sottolinea che le visioni autentiche sono rare e che "gli estatici non si trovano affatto ad ogni piè sospinto, come invece la gente inesperta è facilmente indotta a pensare" (93). Egli ricorda a questo proposito fonti bibliche e i "favori celesti" toccati a Isaia, Geremia ed Ezechiele; nell'epoca cristiana vengono fatti i nomi di Francesco, Domenico e Caterina da Siena. A riprova dell'autenticità della visione e a testimonianza della verità della fede viene invocato il martirio, confermando la tendenza, tipica del misticismo tridentino, ad associare la mistica alle sofferenze di Cristo. Infatti Borromeo ricorda come autentiche la visione che precedette il martirio di Policarpo (raccontata da Eusebio nella *Storia ecclesiastica*) e la visione che anticipò il martirio di Cipriano. Egli può così concludere che "Dio suole compensare le più terribili afflizioni con il sollievo di grazie celesti, soprattutto nel caso di gravissimi patimenti sopportati per la fede" (96).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sull'importanza dei profumi e degli odori nella nozione di sacro si veda quanto scrive Corbin in *Storia sociale degli odori XVII e XIX secolo*. Si veda anche quanto scrive Camporesi nell'introduzione al volume dove parla di come i "mistici odoristi" nel Seicento abbiano dato luogo a sperimentazioni fondate sull'olfatto, cercando di esplorare attraverso questo senso l'invisibile e l'inesprimibile (pp. XLVII-XLVIII).

<sup>3</sup> Sul nesso ascesi-martirio-profezia nel primo cristianesimo si veda Bori, *L'estasi del profeta ed*

Rimane vero che il cardinale ricorda la testimonianza di Cipriano secondo cui la Chiesa primitiva aveva fanciulli estatici, da cui egli non si vergognava affatto di apprendere le cose viste in estasi; ma il cardinale sottolinea soprattutto l'oscurità, l'ambiguità e l'ambivalenza delle visioni, anche di quelle di cui ci parla la Bibbia, e appare interessato piuttosto a ridurre il misticismo a fenomeno ecclesiastico ed essenzialmente cristiano. Si veda a questo proposito il capitolo XI in cui si sostiene che i doni celesti devono essere tenuti nascosti e rimanere interni alla Chiesa perché gli "altri" non capirebbero o mostrerebbero disprezzo per i fenomeni mistici (102-103).<sup>4</sup> Lo spirito controversista che anima certe pagine del testo spinge poi Borromeo a sostenere che gli "infedeli" come i Turchi, i Mauritani, i Persiani e gli idolatri non conoscono il misticismo divino e si limitano a vivere il processo estatico nella forma di possessione diabolica e di negromanzia (116).

In altre pagine il tono si fa più sfumato e il cardinale esprime una certa perplessità sulla possibilità umana di comprendere i fenomeni mistici e di avvicinarsi all'estasi divina, con un atteggiamento che non sarebbe dispiaciuto a Manzoni:

... i giudizi divini sono un *mare magnum*, un oceano impenetrabile all'intelletto umano. Ci sono tante cose che avvengono, di cui non siamo in grado di trovare né il principio né la fine.

(131)

Ma la destinazione pratica di questo testo che doveva aiutare gli ecclesiastici a distinguere il vero misticismo da quello falso impedisce di sviluppare in maniera critica le perplessità conoscitive espresse dal cardinale che, anche in questo settore della sua attività, condivide i limiti e i pregiudizi della propria epoca, come bene aveva visto Alessandro Manzoni. Questi limiti sono evidenti anche nell'atteggiamento e nei giudizi espressi da Federico Borromeo sulle donne, che dovrebbero essere l'oggetto principale della sua trattazione, ma finiscono poi per essere escluse da ogni considerazione critica, a favore di una propensione inquisitoria che vede in loro una predisposizione all'insidia e all'inganno legata alla loro "natura" emotiva e mutevole:

L'indole femminile dà facile ansa agli equivoci e alle insidie. Le donne infatti perdono spesso i sensi, sono di struttura fisica piuttosto debole, hanno sentimenti più labili, che si sprigionano e si decomprimono con uguale leggerezza. Perciò sentono immediatamente odi e offese: non c'è mare in

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altri saggi tra ebraismo e cristianesimo, soprattutto "L'esperienza profetica nell'ascensione di Isaia", pp. 17-30.

<sup>4</sup> In questo il cardinale non farebbe che confermare una tendenza presente già nel mondo antico in cui si è parlato della possibile esistenza di una tradizione profetico-esoterica, non pubblica, con specifici apporti cristiani. Si veda Bori, p. 23.

tempesta che sia agitato quanto l'animo di una donna.

(113)<sup>5</sup>

Nelle parole del cardinale si esprime l'idea della donna identificata con il mondo dell'affettività povero di ragione, cui per converso si contrappone l'universo della logica maschile che sarebbe in grado di sottoporre a controllo la sregolatezza delle passioni. Questo rigido schema oppositivo appare oggi come uno stereotipo e lo si vede soprattutto nell'ampia e circostanziata ricerca di Remo Bodei che ha sottolineato recentemente che passioni come le emozioni e i desideri non sono elementi esterni che si aggiungono alla coscienza per intorbidarla, ma sono elementi "costitutivi della tonalità di qualsiasi modo di essere psichico e persino di ogni orientamento cognitivo" (Bodei, p. 8). In questa analisi la passione non viene più considerata come puro accecamento e non viene più demonizzata, come accadeva ai tempi del Cardinale Borromeo, allo scopo di reprimerla.<sup>6</sup>

Nel testo di Borromeo il riconoscimento che le donne "furono partecipi dei veri doni del cielo" fin dai tempi più remoti della Sibilla appare in questa maniera sommerso dalla selva di preoccupazioni che mirano a denunciare l'"atteggiamento spirituale falso" di cui si rendono colpevoli alcune donne e a distinguere l'estasi naturale, che Borromeo considera come una malattia da curare, da quella divina e quest'ultima da quella diabolica. Tra i molti esempi di "atteggiamento spirituale falso" di ispirazione diabolica Borromeo ricorda quello di una donna che diceva di vedere in estasi, ogni giorno, immagini divine. Borromeo riuscì a svelare l'inganno con uno stratagemma tipico di questa età: far scrivere a questa donna le sue esperienze in modo da poterle controllare. Borromeo chiarisce molto bene la motivazione inquisitoria e repressiva di questo tipo di scrittura che rimane ai suoi occhi il criterio fondamentale per controllare la vita spirituale delle sante e per distinguere la mistica autentica da quella falsa:

Un altro buon criterio per conoscere le persone è quello di interrogarle insistentemente sulla loro vita, mettendo per iscritto, secondo le circostanze e le occasioni, tutto quello che dicono. Così, in un secondo tempo non possono negare le cose dette. Se quelle persone continuassero a raccontare stupidità, o perché esse stesse ingannate o perché volessero prendere in giro gli altri, sarebbero in tal modo smascherate.

(141)

<sup>5</sup> Altrove il giudizio di Borromeo sulle donne è ancora più duro: "... basta che ci ricordiamo che nel mondo fu la donna a portare il primo e rovinoso inganno. Il principio di ogni sfacelo è sorto lì, sulla sua bocca, piena di falsità e menzogna" (164).

<sup>6</sup> "Presupporre energie selvagge e brancolanti nel buio ('passioni'), che dovrebbero essere dirette e tenute a freno da un'istanza ordinatrice illuminata ('ragione'), significa infatti spesso prefigurare un alibi polemico per reprimerle o canalizzarle" (9).



Avvenne così che la donna, dietro esortazione di un religioso, scrisse cosa vedeva degli angeli e lei scrisse tra l'altro che gli angeli le apparivano talvolta sotto le spoglie di animali. A questo punto il terreno per l'intervento censorio del cardinale era pronto:

Io allora la rimproverai, ma ella rispose che ciò era avvenuto anche nell'Apocalisse. Obiettai che l'Apocalisse aveva sempre un significato di mistero "che manca del tutto — così dissi — nelle tue visioni, per cui queste immagini ti devono far credere che le tue visioni sono inezie e deliri". Notavo anche come quelle visioni fossero frammiste di sensualità, cioè di canti e di altre piacevolezze che esaltano i sensi e non la mente. La donna aggiungeva d'aver visto in forme materiali i sette doni dello Spirito Santo con tutti i loro frutti ed effetti. Ma io capivo, e lo sospettavo agevolmente, che questo era piuttosto un prodotto della mente che non un mistero celeste.

(138-139)

Come si vede l'intervento del cardinale si fonda sull'idea che l'esperienza mistica rimanga confinata nell'ombra del mistero e non possa essere facilmente spiegata con immagini sensibili legate al piacere dei sensi. A questo punto il testo di Borromeo si trasforma in un vero e proprio elogio della dissimulazione a scopo censorio:

Nei colloqui con le estatiche e con altre false visionarie occorre invece far uso della dissimulazione: saper introdurre opportunamente nel discorso una qualche domanda su cose riguardanti l'intimo pensiero dell'inquirente, cioè i segreti dell'animo, dei quali neppure il demonio può avere "sentore".

(142)

Il cardinale sottolinea che bisogna credere poco anche ai discorsi che si sentono fare dalle donne in estasi, anche perché può succedere che gli estatici possano manifestare sublimi idee senza peraltro che queste nascano da un intervento straordinario del cielo (192). Anche la glossolalia va presa "con i piedi di piombo"; analogo discorso va fatto per l'eccessivo entusiasmo, perciò occorre

. . . stare all'erta di fronte alle beatitudini che sembrano spirituali, a quelle gioie esteriori che a volte sprizzano dai cuori pii, perché non incorriamo nel pericolo di tacciare come profane le letizie dei santi o, viceversa, perché non giudichiamo sante le piacevolezze comuni e naturali.

(197)

Il cardinale svolge un discorso analogo per le lacrime poiché il demonio "si insinua anche tra le lacrimucce". Più inclini alle lacrime sono i "temperamenti umidi", i buoni bevitori, i timidi e gli "effeminati". Solo le lacrime che nascono dal dolore sono "naturali" (198).

## II. La scrittura obbediente e il nulla

Dopo questa ampia escursione sul significato culturale del libro di Federico Borromeo dedicato al misticismo femminile, mette buon conto analizzare direttamente gli scritti di una mistica del '600: Veronica Giuliani. Infatti Veronica Giuliani appare un caso esemplare di mistica tridentina, in cui viene meno la dimensione profetica presente in Caterina da Siena e nella mistica medievale, e si afferma la convinzione che l'esperienza mistica deve essere testimonianza del dolore e della passione di Cristo. Nelle pagine del suo *Diario* leggiamo:

O pene che raccontare non posso. Non è tempo di potere fare e dire come uno vorrebbe; ma si dice e si fa tutto l'opposto, e questo dà più pena e fa provare un tormento segreto che raccontare non si pole.

(*Diario*, in *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, p. 511)

A conferma di quanto emergeva dalle pagine del cardinale Borromeo, il caso di Veronica Giuliani mette in luce come la mistica tridentina, maschile e femminile, tenda sempre più a farsi ecclesiastica e ad essere sottoposta a un rigido controllo da parte delle autorità religiose che non consentono nessuna manifestazione esterna e nessun discorso sulla *renovatio ecclesiae*. Queste tendenze sfociano nella mistica del nulla di cui si trova ampia testimonianza non solo in Veronica Giuliani ma anche nella cultura barocca e secentesca.<sup>7</sup>

Mino Bergamo ha studiato le relazioni che legano il tema della perdita e dell'annichilamento alla cultura barocca francese e al sistema globale della cultura d'epoca (Bergamo, "Il puro amore davanti alla legge dello scambio"). L'ipotesi che guida la sua ricerca sostiene che nel XVI e XVII secolo si assiste alla formazione di un'etica dominata dal modello economico in tutti i rapporti sociali, pubblici e privati. In opere eterogenee che vanno dal *Tartuffe* di Molière alla scrittura mistica si assiste allo sviluppo di una regola di comportamento sociale che consiste nel pagare i propri debiti e nell'onorare il circuito dello scambio. Questa legge economica assume una funzione modellizzante per tutti i tipi di discorso e lo stesso discorso mistico ne appare in qualche modo influenzato, sia pure per via negativa. Infatti nella scrittura mistica cristiana il modello etico-economico di cui si parla sopra viene regolarmente sovvertito a vantaggio dell'affermazione della vita della carità che è essenzialmente antieconomica. Ma rimane il fatto che, pur opponendosi al modello economico che si afferma nel

<sup>7</sup> Si veda Leonardi, "La santità delle donne," in *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, pp. 54-57. Si veda anche l'ampio e documentato studio di Zarri, *Dalla profezia alla disciplina*, in *Donne e fede*, pp. 177-225, e anche Matthews Grieco, *Modelli di santità femminile nell'Italia del Rinascimento e della Controriforma*, pp. 303-325

XVII secolo, la scrittura mistica rimane strutturalmente dipendente da quello stesso modello che pure sostanzialmente viene a sovvertire (Bergamo, "Il puro amore davanti alla legge dello scambio", p. 205). Lo stesso rapporto con il divino che il puro amore dei mistici vuole stabilire appare in qualche modo influenzato dalla legge dello scambio, in cui uno dei contraenti (l'essere umano) perde tutto quanto è in suo possesso e l'altro contraente (la divinità) si avvantaggia di questa situazione, traendone vantaggio e godimento. In questo modo la dipendenza del discorso mistico dal modello etico-economico da strutturale diventa speculare ((Bergamo, "Il puro amore davanti alla legge dello scambio", p. 220-221).

Il motivo mistico della perdita e del Nulla diventa un tema ossessivo nelle pagine del *Diario* di Veronica Giuliani. Si fanno alcuni esempi:

In questo punto mi venne come un rapimento il quale mi fece come di volo apresare ivi ove stava il Signore. O Dio! Qui ebbi una comunicazione intima che non posso raccontarla, ben sì che mi lasciò una cognizione del mio niente, della mia impotenza. Più io conoscevo questa verità, più lume avevo di Dio; più Idio mi si comunicava, più intima cognizione del mio nulla avevo. . . . All'i riflessi e novi riflessi di Dio medesimo ritornava tutto, gli lumi, gli doni, le grazie e tutto quel mai che Idio opera nell'anima, tutto esce dalle sue mane, tutto ritorna nelle sue mane, e fa vedere che è tutto lui, e così l'anima ha maggiore cognizione del suo niente e di niente deve presumere, perché il niente non pole niente, non opera niente, non deve ritenere niente; perché tanto non aggiugne niente al niente.

(*Diario*, p. 514)

La comprensione del proprio nulla per Veronica Giuliani avveniva per via intima e non poteva essere esplicitata nel racconto. Il niente è all'origine dell'Incarnazione, cioè dell'"umiliazione" divina che fa conoscere alla creatura il proprio nulla; per questa ragione le umiliazioni e l'umano patire appaiono l'unica maniera per ritrovare il niente della dimensione umana più autentica:

Oh! qui sì che l'anima ha gran lume sopra questo punto, ma non si può descrivere. Pare che l'istesso niente s'anichili, si profondi ne l'essere suo e vede davanti ad esso Idio infenito, incomprendibile, inmenso, e comprende che esso medemo s'è umiliato tanto, che per questo niente è venuto dal cielo in terra e s'è abasato tanto, s'è umiliato tanto, ha patito tanto, ha operato tanto e tutto ciò è stato, a ciò noi conosciamo chi egli è, e chi siamo noi. Esso ci ha insegnato la strada per ritrovare il niente, cioè le umiliazioni e il patire. Questi son mezzi per farci conoscere il nostro anientamento.

(*Diario*, p. 515)

Veronica elabora la concezione del "nulla operante" che nasce precisamente dalla constatazione che l'anima non può nulla e vive in una condizione di passività assoluta:



Soggiungo e dico che, quando ho detto di quel niente operante, ho voluto dire di quando l'anima ha quella vera cognizione propria di non potere niente e di non essere niente. Questo io chiamo il niente operante: quando davvero si conosce che non si fa niente, non si può niente e niente siamo.

(*Diario*, p. 516)

Al niente si oppongono l'amor proprio e la passione per le cose terrene. È nei rapimenti che il Signore invita l'anima ad umiliarsi e a ricongiungersi al nulla:

Così mi diceva questa notte esso medemo: — Se mi voi trovare, prima trova il niente; se mi vuoi possedere, prima fermati nel niente; se mi vuoi contentare, fa conto del niente, non che esso sia apprezzato, ma disprezzato, avelito e sotto gli piedi di tutti.

(*Diario*, p. 519)

L'intima comunicazione rimane comunque oscura su questo punto e inaccessibile al discorso. Infatti il *Diario* di Veronica Giuliani è pervaso dalle dichiarazioni di ineffabilità. La via negativa alla conoscenza mistica di Dio può essere compendiata nell'ossimoro "Per nescientiam scire" che Giovanni Bona nella *Via compendii ad Deum* (1657) associa al lavoro dello scultore che leva la sua materia per ricavarne la statua perfetta, per indicare dunque nel rapimento e non nell'ascesi la dimensione propria di questa via (Bona, p. 74). La via negativa non può alludere all'unione con il divino se non attraverso i paradossi e le analogie suggerite da figure retoriche che non consentono mediazione, come le antitesi, o figure retoriche che realizzano analogie paradossali, come l'ossimoro, figura fondamentale della via negativa (Ossola, "Apoteosi ed ossimoro", pp. 91-92). Si vedano questi esempi dal *Diario* di Veronica Giuliani:

Non si trova mai modo per amare Idio, vi vole questo modo senza modo per corrispondere ed amare il sommo bene.

(526)

Dico e ridico e non dico niente. . . . più se ne dice, niente si dice, niente si può dire. Tutto ciò che si sa, è niente; nisuno può penetrare cosa sia amore.

(530-531)

. . . tacendo dirò tutto; dicendo non dico niente.

(533)

Io son pazza per amore; voglio sempre più impazzire, e, fra pazzie amorose, griderò sempre più forte: Il penare per puro amore, mi dà vita, mi dà forze —. Io non so raccontare né posso raccontare le pazzie d'amore: sento e non sento; vedo e non vedo; non so cosa faccia; ho un so che in me superiore a tutte l'altre volte; mi pare di capire che Idio, dominante in me, lo sento, nell'intimo dell'anima, che va dicendo: — Ego sum qui sum: Io sono chi

sono, e tu sei chi non sei, non sei nulla —. Nel profondo dell'annientamento mi vedo porre.

(534)

Nel cammino che va dall'antitesi all'ossimoro si consuma la via negativa che conduce all'afasia, al silenzio nella visione e nella parola, alla conoscenza del nulla. Il nulla in Veronica Giuliani nasce nel momento in cui l'essere umano è messo in relazione con l'onnipotente Altro, trovandosi in questa maniera esonerato da qualunque determinazione ed espropriandosi totalmente di se stesso. All'annichilamento di sé corrisponde l'affermazione dell'identità divina nei modi di quello che Longino avrebbe definito il sublime religioso, racchiuso nella testimonianza biblica (trasmessa da Dio a Mosè) dell'"Ego sum qui sum". Da questa condizione di assoluta dipendenza e di annichilamento di sé deriva anche la ricerca del patire come forma di conoscenza, ricerca che rivela la presenza di diversi aspetti patologici nella personalità di Veronica. Come ha scritto Giovanni Pozzi:

Veronica si procurò dolori fisici con una determinazione che sull'orizzonte d'un giudizio umano va definita malsana. Questi suoi eccessi aggiunsero ai dolori fisici sofferenze morali senza numero, talora provenienti da un comprensibile istinto di difesa dell'ordine costituito, talora da curiosità emergenti nel suo ambiente, qualificabili per eufemismo, come crudeli indiscrezioni. Tutte, le sue e le altrui, tradiscono forme di deformazione psichica.

(Pozzi, "Il 'parere' autobiografico", p. 184)

Giovanni Pozzi ritiene che iscrivendo il dolore in una dimensione di esperienza del divino Veronica Giuliani abbia finito per trasformarlo in una condizione privilegiata della propria vicenda spirituale. Dal canto suo Carlo A. Landini, proprio a proposito delle opere di Veronica Giuliani, rivendica la necessità di un rapporto dialettico e interdipendente tra psicologia e fede, in cui la psicologia possa offrire molti spunti di indagine alla teologia, senza per questo voler sovrapporre e confondere le due prospettive che devono rimanere distinte (Landini, *Fenomenologia dell'estasi*, p. 20).

Tirando le somme della sua indagine, condotta secondo una metodologia di genere tipologico-fenomenologico, Landini esprime dubbi e incertezze sulla maniera in cui è stata svolta la ricerca sulla vita della santa in ambito ecclesiastico, dove è venuta meno l'anamnesi obiettiva degli aspetti più propriamente "nosologici e patografici" (*Fenomenologia dell'estasi*, p. 212). Un altro limite segnalato da Landini consiste nel fatto che la narrazione della vita di Veronica è rimasta interna alla storia della chiesa ed è stata portata avanti da membri interni alla chiesa, tanto che l'insieme delle testimonianze e delle perizie mediche sulla santa si configura ai suoi occhi come un *testis unus* e per questa ragione *nullus*. L'atteggiamento di Landini è quello dello studioso "umile" che di fronte allo stato della documentazione in suo possesso riconosce l'impossibilità di

tracciare un profilo "storicamente attendibile" della santa (*Fenomenologia dell'estasi*, p. 216).

A suo giudizio non è nemmeno possibile emettere un giudizio definitivo sulla condizione mentale della santa, visto che non ci sono notizie precise sulle sue condizioni di salute. A proposito dei sintomi isterici e nevrotici della Giuliani, dopo aver sostenuto che esiste una generale difficoltà a definire con contorni precisi sia il concetto di santità che quello di sanità mentale, Landini critica da una parte le posizioni di quanti stabiliscono l'inconciliabilità fra santità e malattia mentale, e, dall'altra, la posizioni di quanti invece stabiliscono il necessario rapporto reciproco tra santità e malattia mentale. Per Landini non c'è interdipendenza necessaria tra i due fenomeni, che rimangono comunque distinti, e conclude:

In questo senso la malattia di Veronica è dovuta al caso, ma ella avrebbe potuto pervenire alla propria santificazione anche senza di essa: l'isteria veronichiana è da considerarsi, perciò, alla stregua di un qualunque "accidente" storico.

(*Fenomenologia dell'estasi*, p. 233)

L'analisi di Landini reinserisce il discorso su Veronica Giuliani nell'ambito della teologia cattolica più recente tanto da riaffermare in perfetta sintonia con il *Nuovo dizionario di spiritualità* il valore salvifico della sofferenza umana.<sup>8</sup>

Il tipo di illuminazione mistica che si annuncia nel mondo cattolico nel secolo XVII corrisponde ad una visione del mondo in cui si perde la dimensione etica che aveva caratterizzato il misticismo dei secoli precedenti, in particolare quello fiorito in ambito rinascimentale e legato all'affermazione del mondo e alla valorizzazione umana. La mistica del nulla convince l'essere umano che il non essere è meglio dell'essere e lo spinge a vivere un'esistenza improntata sulla rinuncia a vivere. Il nulla dei mistici non appartiene solo alla dimensione della libertà, quella dimensione che "lascia essere l'essere stesso a partire dal nulla", come scrive Sergio Givone, il quale non affronta il tema della pura negazione dell'essere, che si conclude nel non essere, nella rinuncia all'essere (Givone, *Storia del nulla*, p. 38). D'altro canto, il rilievo storico di questi fenomeni induce lo studioso non pago di questi esiti a non limitare il suo campo di indagine al solo mondo cattolico e a verificare l'esistenza di risposte sostanzialmente diverse da quella cattolica, per esempio nell'Inghilterra del XVII secolo, dove si assiste all'emergere di un misticismo ancora legato alla profezia e interessato al mondo e alla rivoluzione sociale, con fenomeni di profetismo estatico femminile di grande interesse.<sup>9</sup> Solo una prospettiva di questo genere può contribuire a porre le

<sup>8</sup> Landini cita la voce "Psicopatologia e religiosità" in S. De Fiores, T. Goffi (a cura di), *Nuovo dizionario di spiritualità*. Roma: Paoline, 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Si veda su questo punto Phyllis Mack. *Visionary Women. Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-*



fondamenta di un discorso nuovo che punta a riaffermare il valore positivo della mistica, al di là degli aspetti sociologici e politici che in essa trovano pure espressione.<sup>10</sup> Misticismo, questo, che appare legato ad un'antropologia meno negativa di quella sottesa alla mistica del nulla che abbiamo visto in Veronica Giuliani. In termini storici penso soprattutto all'emergere del quaccherismo e della teologia ad esso collegata della luce divina presente in ogni uomo, una teologia a cui corrisponde un tipo di visione divina in cui l'anima umana non si annulla, ma trova il suo compimento in Dio, ritrovando nella visione estatica la propria condizione originaria prima del peccato originale.<sup>11</sup> È su un misticismo di questo genere e sull'apertura alle culture extraeuropee che occorre far leva se si intende affrontare quello che per Albert Schweitzer era il problema di fondo del misticismo sia in Occidente che in Oriente, vale a dire l'elaborazione di una mistica di affermazione etica del mondo, di una mistica insomma che sia al tempo stesso accettazione del mondo, e, quindi, visione etica (*Les Grands Penseurs de l'Inde*, p. 20). In questa direzione acquista valore l'elaborazione di un punto di vista storico-critico sulla propria cultura religiosa e un'interrogazione della mistica che sappia fare i conti con i problemi del mondo contemporaneo. Se la mistica deve essere "dono celeste", come voleva Borromeo, deve insomma essere in grado di elaborare un tipo di sapienza che avvicini gli esseri umani nel tempo in cui viviamo.<sup>12</sup>

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*Century England.*

<sup>10</sup> Quando penso al valore positivo della mistica, in particolare della mistica femminile, nel nostro tempo penso soprattutto a Etty Hillesum di cui si può vedere il *Diario*, o a Simone Weil. Il potenziale valore positivo della mistica viene cancellato dalle impostazioni teoriche e di ricerca che si limitano a studiare i rapporti di potere impliciti nel discorso mistico. Sembra essere questo il caso del recentissimo libro di Magli, *Storia laica delle donne religiose*. Di orizzonti più ampi l'altrettanto recente volume collettivo *Donne e fede. Santità e vita religiosa in Italia*, da cui tuttavia rimane esclusa la prospettiva comparatistica. Si legge, tra l'altro nell'Introduzione di Lucetta Scaraffia e Gabriella Zarri: "La religione cristiana si configura quindi come una religione maschile — un unico Dio maschio e una gerarchia celibataria da cui è esclusa la presenza femminile — ma, al tempo stesso, specialmente all'interno della confessione cattolica, offre un'apertura alla visibilità e alla presenza sociale delle donne attraverso la scelta di vita verginale religiosa e rivela un'attenzione speciale per gli aspetti culturali di tipo materiale e immaginario ritenuti tradizionalmente di ambito femminile" (p. XV).

<sup>11</sup> Si veda su questo aspetto Bori, "La visione del Paradiso nel Journal di Geirge Fox". Si veda anche *La società degli amici. Il pensiero dei quaccheri*. Più in generale, sulla metafora della luce-verità si può vedere Blumenberg, "Licht als Methapher der Wahrheit." Blumenberg sostiene che la metaforica della luce si concentra "sull'originario schiudersi della domanda per la quale si tenta una risposta, interrogativo di carattere presistemico la cui pienezza intenzionale ha 'provocato' di per sé le metafore. Non ci si deve ritrarre di fronte alla presunta ingenuità di formulare queste domande che sono quelle di fondazione, anche se non dovessero venire mai poste espressamente", Blumenberg, *Paradigmi per una metaforologia*, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> In questa direzione, ma partendo da presupposti filosofici molto distanti da quelli di Schweitzer,

### III. Mistica e letteratura

A conferma del carattere pervasivo del tema del nulla nel mondo cattolico in ambito barocco si può ricordare che una clamorosa *quaestio de nihilo* impegna l'Accademia degli Incogniti nel 1634;<sup>13</sup> mentre due anni prima nell'Accademia napoletana degli Incauti Giuseppe Castiglione (Trabocchevole) aveva letto un *Discorso academico in lode del Niente* in cui il Niente viene poi dichiarato più antico del Caos, uguale a Dio in antichità. Il Caos nacque dal Niente e dal Niente nacquero le Tenebre. A testimonianza di questa genealogia si citano i poeti antichi e le Sacre Scritture, in particolare il libro della *Genesi*: "In principio creavit Deus coelum et terram; terra autem erat inanis et vacua" (Gen. 1, 1-2). Il Niente sarebbe dunque all'origine della creazione perché senza la privazione, la mancanza di forma e il vuoto introdotti dal Niente non ci potrebbe essere la forma opposta introdotta dalla generazione: la materia e la forma si producono dal Niente, "la creazione (tranne Iddio) altro principio non riconosce, che il solo Niente." Il Niente, sostiene Giuseppe Castiglione, è all'origine della divina onnipotenza. Infatti Dio creò il mondo dal Niente e lasciò "Il Niente di milioni di mondi", questi mondi sono resi possibili dalla presenza del Niente, che dunque non si può cancellare, pena il venir meno della stessa creatività divina.

Anche l'anima, come ogni altra "grandezza umana", ha origine nel Niente. Il Niente appare anche collegato all'idea della Grazia costituendone anzi il fondamento, come ebbe a dire il Re profeta: "Pro Nihilo salvos facies eos"; e come si ritrova in Agostino.<sup>14</sup> Castiglione conclude in suo discorso ricordando come il Niente sia anche all'origine dell'Incarnazione, poiché la Vergine Maria per accogliere il Dio infinito dentro di sé ha dovuto annichilarsi:

La Vergine per rendersi capevole di Dio infinito dovea farsi infinita: non si poteva fare positivamente infinita, perché in quella maniera solo Iddio può

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e facendo molte distinzioni, si può leggere anche Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure*. Penso soprattutto alle pagine dove Bataille si esprime senza mezzi termini contro l'ascesi poiché "con l'ascesi, l'esperienza si condanna a prendere un valore di oggetto positivo. L'ascesi postula la liberazione, la salvezza, la presa di possesso dell'oggetto più desiderabile" (p. 54). È noto che per Bataille non ci sono "vie di uscita" da ricercare attraverso l'estasi mistica, l'esperienza poetica o l'abbandono al nulla. L'esperienza interiore gli appare come un progetto in quanto si esprime attraverso il linguaggio. Essa non può ignorare l'eroticismo e deve scegliere la via ardua dell'"uomo intero" (p. 57).

<sup>13</sup> Questi sono i testi prodotti: *Il Niente. Discorso di Luigi Manzini; Le Glorie del Niente discorse dal sig. Marin dall'Angelo; Il Niente annientato. Discorso del conte Raimondo Vidal*. Questi testi sono stati studiati da Ossola, "Elogio del Nulla".

<sup>14</sup> *Sal.* 55:8 (Vulgata). Agostino commenta questo verso nelle *Enarrationes*; cfr. *Corpus christianorum* 39, p. 685 sgg.

essere infinito: si fece perciò infinita negativamente, annichilandosi e approfondando in tanta umiltà, che quasi si ridusse a Niente.

(Castiglione, *Discorso Academico in Lode del Niente*)

Nelle parole di Giuseppe Castiglione ricorrono immagini e concetti che si ritrovano anche nella scrittura mistica di Veronica Giuliani. Questa relativa contiguità si può spiegare in parte con le comuni fonti bibliche, da individuare in particolare in san Paolo e nell'idea di nulla come termine passivo rispetto a Dio, che va perfezionato attraverso l'umiltà e l'obbedienza (Gal. 6:3; Cor. 12:11). Ci sono tuttavia differenze significative. Innanzitutto, il linguaggio di Castiglione è più colto e letterario di quello della Giuliani, e occorre aggiungere che la differenza stilistica rimanda ad una differenza sostanziale tra i due tipi di scrittura, quella mistica e quella letteraria. La scrittura in Veronica Giuliani tende ad elidersi attraverso la visione "mistica", in "carne e ossa" delle cose. Una volta realizzata la visione, non ci dovrebbe più essere bisogno del corpo artificiale della scrittura, ma questo tentativo di elisione della scrittura è destinato a fallire, poiché la scrittura da semplice strumento si trasforma in soggetto che riduce alla propria logica il soggetto metafisico, trasformandolo in un semplice consumatore di scrittura.<sup>15</sup>

Rispetto alla scrittura mistica che punta ad una sorta di autoelisione, la scrittura letteraria punta al contrario ad esibirsi come tale, attraverso un uso amplificato della retorica e degli artifici tecnici. La scrittura letteraria punta insomma a porsi come traccia della contestualizzazione patica cercando di trattenere qualcosa del *pathos* originario dell'esperienza reale, che si mantiene soprattutto nella poesia che produce una proliferazione di significati spesso inconciliabili e indecidibili. Anche l'uso delle figure retoriche appare motivato da strategie diverse, come ha mostrato Mino Bergamo. Ad esempio, l'antitesi come ogni altra figura retorica è polivalente e può essere usata per scopi diversi a seconda che venga utilizzata nel linguaggio mistico o nel codice barocco. Nel discorso mistico l'antitesi funziona come "un dispositivo di auto-distruzione del discorso" e "organizza la messa a morte di ogni predicato" (Bergamo, "Retorica", p. 225). Questa funzione dell'antitesi si iscrive nell'ambito di una concezione della divinità intesa come infinita trascendenza, come avviene nella speculazione dionisiana espressa nella *Teologia mistica*. Nella letteratura barocca l'antitesi mostra invece un altro obiettivo strategico:

produrre la similitudine mediante l'organizzazione di strutture simmetriche, per mezzo della similitudine generare l'equivoco, e attraverso l'equivoco sospingere l'identità in un'irreparabile vacanza.

(Bergamo, "Retorica", p. 233)

Nella lode del Niente di Castiglione non si realizza quel processo di

<sup>15</sup> Su questi temi si veda Sini, *Filosofia e scrittura*. Sulle caratteristiche della scrittura mistica si veda Maria Modica Vasta, *La scrittura mistica*.



cancellazione dell'io che appare invece caratteristico della scrittura mistica e il Nulla mantiene nel suo discorso una funzione paradossale e simmetrica rispetto al mondo creato, tanto da alludere chiaramente ad una sorta di creazione perenne, resa possibile proprio dall'eliminazione della referenzialità stabilita una volta per tutte. Il Nulla in Castiglione e nelle polemiche barocche allude alla possibilità di un continuo rinnovarsi del discorso, alle capacità fantastiche della lingua, proprie di un parlare in "assenza" e "a meraviglia". Il nulla mistico di Veronica Giuliani allude invece ai limiti di discorso che punta ad autoelidersi fino alla completa eliminazione del soggetto che paradossalmente si identifica con la scrittura obbediente.

Come ha scritto Giovanni Pozzi, sulla scrittura mistica femminile pesa una duplice interdizione: da una parte, come si è visto anche nelle pagine di Borromeo, sta l'atto inquisitorio dei cosiddetti direttori spirituali che costringe le mistiche a scrivere; dall'altra parte sta la proibizione a trarre vantaggio di questa scrittura una volta che è stata compilata. È esemplare in questo senso proprio il caso di Veronica Giuliani costretta a scrivere per trent'anni senza poter rileggere una volta quello che scriveva.<sup>16</sup> "Per fare obbedienza scriverò tutto" scrive Veronica Giuliani nelle pagine del suo *Diario*, rivolgendosi evidentemente al suo direttore spirituale, rendendo al tempo stesso il lettore non previsto consapevole della peculiarità del testo scritto che ha di fronte (Giuliani, *Diario*, p. 532). È vero che le scrittrici spirituali hanno istintivamente in qualche modo elaborato una forma letteraria originale che va nella direzione del diario e dell'autobiografia, prima che si assistesse alla codificazione secolare e letteraria in senso proprio di questi generi.<sup>17</sup> Ma la scrittura mistica femminile appare segnata dalla presenza del direttore spirituale che impone non solo di scrivere, ma anche come scrivere e ciò di cui scrivere. Si deve poi tenere presente l'esistenza di una specifica pratica devozionale che non consiste in un discorso teologico ma in una scrittura che serve "per eccitarsi a pensare come amare Dio" (Pozzi, "L'alfabeto delle sante", p. 23).<sup>18</sup>

Pozzi ritiene sia venuto il tempo di eliminare l'indifferenza della letteratura verso queste forme di scrittura soprattutto per il periodo moderno, che rimane

<sup>16</sup> Su questi aspetti si veda Pozzi, "L'alfabeto delle sante".

<sup>17</sup> Si veda a questo proposito Georges Gusdorf, "De l'autobiographie iniziatiue à l'autobiographie genre littéraire"; per quanto riguarda in particolare il diario intimo si veda Scrivano, "La penna che spia": giornale intimo e scrittura", dove si considerano però solo le origini secolari del diario fatte risalire al Sei-Settecento "in stretto rapporto con la coscienza della personalità e della costruzione dell'esperienza individuale analizzata dagli empiristi inglesi . . ." (p. 23).

<sup>18</sup> Sulla scrittura autobiografica in obbedienza ad un ordine si veda anche Gómez-Moriana, "Autobiographie et discours rituel. La confession autobiographique au tribunal de l'Inquisition". L'autore sostiene la necessità di affrontare la scrittura autobiografica della tradizione ascetica e mistica spagnola prestando attenzione, più che all'individuo che emerge dal racconto autobiografico, alla superstruttura di potere che lo produce (p. 459).

escluso dalla riflessione critica. Ma egli aggiunge subito dopo che l'interesse per questa scrittura non si limita al fatto letterario, anzi più che all'arte si affida alla passione, "all'immediatezza e diciam pure brutalità con cui seppero evocare le forze originarie della vita in un groviglio di brame e spasimi ai limiti del subumano" (Pozzi, "L'alfabeto delle sante", p. 27). Egli ha anche sostenuto che la narrazione autobiografica di Veronica Giuliani non può essere ridotta ai contenuti e alle forme dell'autobiografia letteraria e secolare, precisamente perché nella scrittura mistica di Veronica Giuliani "l'io protagonista è sopraffatto e perché impone all'io narrante di se medesimo forme inconsuete per enunciare quella storia fatta propria" (Pozzi, "L'alfabeto delle sante", p. 162).

Oltre a *Diario*, Veronica scrisse, non per iniziativa propria, ma per comando ecclesiastico, cinque autobiografie. Ben trentanove confessori controllavano l'evoluzione della sua spiritualità attraverso la scrittura, fino al punto da determinare una significativa correzione di rotta nell'impostazione stessa della scrittura che nella prima autobiografia si dilunga a descrivere anche i difetti della futura santa. Questi difetti scompaiono nelle stesure successive probabilmente per un intervento diretto di chi ordinava a Veronica di scrivere:

I termini del dovere comportano dunque che Veronica fornisca a dei censori elementi atti a formulare su di lei un giudizio di loro esclusiva pertinenza. È una specie di confessione processuale.

(Pozzi, "L'alfabeto delle sante", p. 165)

Veronica cerca di aggirare la censura facendo appello direttamente a Dio che gli detta una scrittura che quindi diventa insindacabile, o parlando della propria infanzia eludendo in questa maniera la sfera di competenza dei direttori spirituali. Dire che nell'autobiografia di Veronica Giuliani compare l'io della scrittrice è dunque vero se si considerano i frammenti di io che emergono qua e là tra le pieghe della scrittura obbediente che danno vita a un "io umano dal profilo sicuro", per quanto riguarda l'infanzia della santa (Pozzi, "L'alfabeto delle sante", p. 175). Vengono da qui le notizie su quell'ambiente familiare saturo di religione che fu determinante nella formazione della religiosità di Veronica. L'ingresso nel chiostro corrisponde con il venir meno di queste parentesi autobiografiche e con la concentrazione sui fenomeni straordinari che la investono. Inoltre, in questa scrittura viene meno quello che si considera il presupposto fondamentale della scrittura autobiografica di tipo spirituale e religioso e cioè il momento della conversione che corrisponde alla decisione della scrittura (Harpham, "Conversion and Language of Autobiography").

Veronica è fin dall'inizio un'anima tesa al congiungimento con Dio e la sua scrittura autobiografica non tende alla conoscenza di sé ma al vero e proprio annullamento di sé, e appare pervasa da dichiarazioni di ineffabilità, da amnesie, assenze fino a concludersi in una confessione di ignoranza. Giovanni Pozzi ha parlato a questo proposito della presenza in questa scrittura di un "alter ego

autobiografico" caratterizzato da "un io-altro che si sovrappone all'io protagonista e v'imprime i suoi tratti" (Pozzi, "L'alfabeto delle sante", p. 179). Le fondamentali stesse della scrittura autobiografica vengono in questa maniera scosse alla radice e vengono dissolte, perché l'autobiografia appare impossibile là ove manchi un io che si racconti (Pozzi, "L'alfabeto delle sante", p. 192). A conferma di questo occorre ricordare che l'autobiografia di Veronica Giuliani, giunta al termine, viene scritta col pronome di seconda persona, immaginandosi dettata dalla Madonna. In questa maniera viene cancellata l'identità di autore e narratore, che costituisce il cardine e il presupposto di ogni autobiografia, venendosi ad instaurare un tipo di scrittura "dialogica" tipica del mondo cattolico in cui chi scrive non fa che "rispondere" alle sollecitazioni e domande del confessore o del controllore spirituale.

In conclusione, sembra necessario mantenere una distinzione metodologica tra letteratura e mistica; questa distinzione va motivata anche sul piano teorico in quanto esiste una tradizione di linguaggio specifica dell'esperienza religiosa. Lo studio delle scritture religiose non può comunque non svilupparsi sul terreno letterario, e aprirsi a settori sino a questo punto considerati laterali, come la storia delle religioni. Tra esperienza mistica ed esperienza letteraria non c'è comunque una distinzione assoluta, come aveva riconosciuto Giovanni Getto, e al tempo stesso non c'è opposizione di principio tra esperienza estetica ed esperienza religiosa. Tuttavia non possiamo che condividere le preoccupazioni dello stesso Getto nel momento in cui segnalava la cautela che deve accompagnare il critico di fronte alla letteratura religiosa, in particolare di fronte ai fenomeni del meraviglioso e del sublime religioso, fenomeni verso i quali il critico non deve indulgere per non dissipare in questo modo i valori spirituali e l'esperienza interiore dei mistici (Getto, "La letteratura religiosa").

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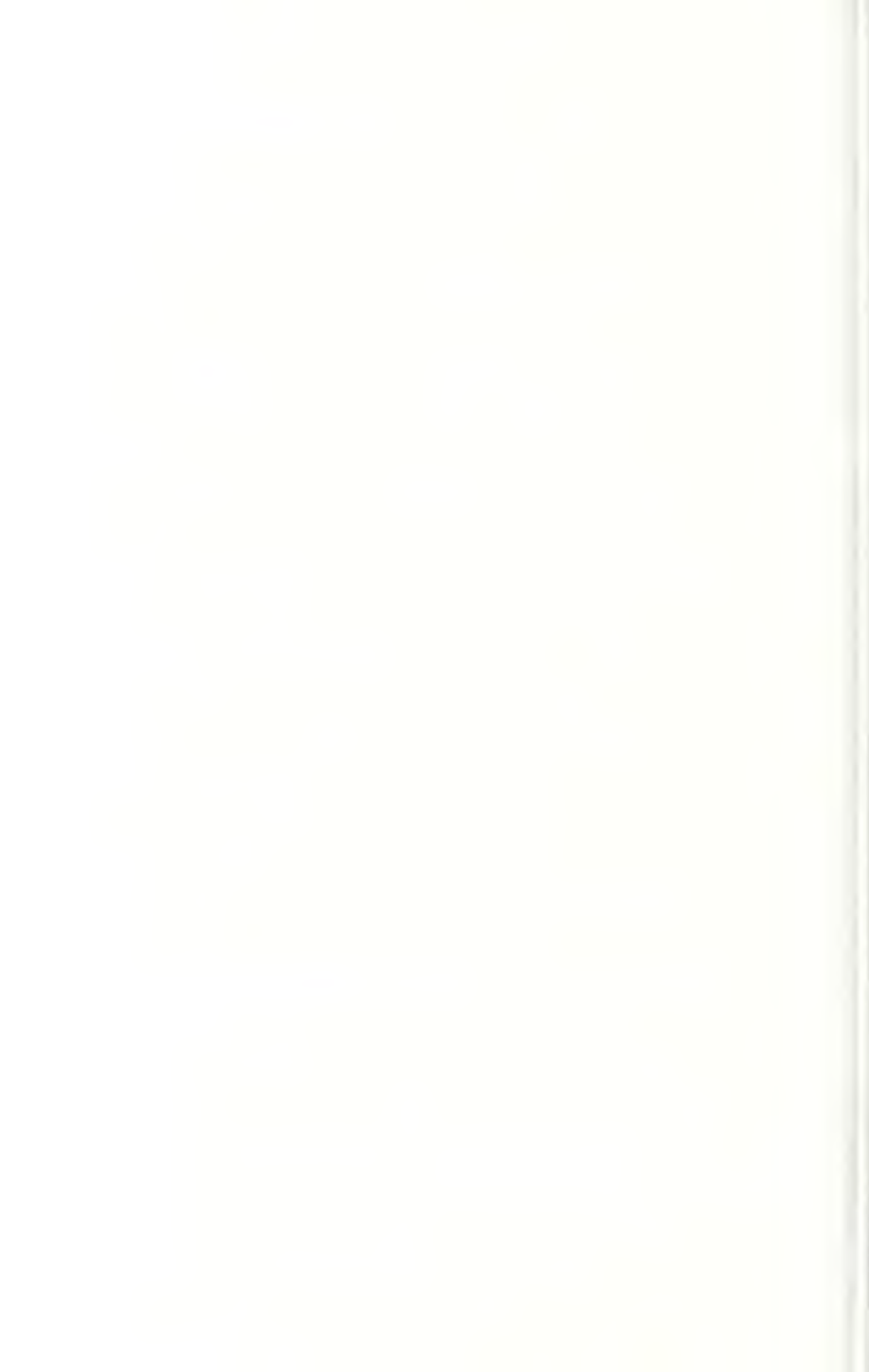
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## Visions of the Mystic / Mystical Visions: Interpretations and Self-Interpretations of Gemma Galgani

### 1. Introduction

The entry on Gemma Galgani of Lucca in the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* is rather hyperbolic in its claim that Gemma “figura degnamente accanto al Poverello d’Assisi e a Caterina da Siena” (108). Such a statement, although it is exaggerated, makes it tempting to investigate the causes of the present obscurity of this formerly popular saint. And in this process it soon becomes clear that the very reasons for Gemma’s past popularity form the bases of her present lack of luster: her mystical practice, which aroused the marvelled devotion of those who religiously believed in her, while it simultaneously provoked the loudly skeptical (if somewhat prurient) curiosity of doctors and scientists, now classes her among the hysterics with whom, according to many, the history of Christian women’s mysticism is replete.

From both religious and medical quarters Gemma Galgani has elicited a bodily hermeneutics that has often been deployed at the expense of her verbal self-interpretations; and this type of hermeneutics has taken place in spite of the fact that, as a critic points out, “Our knowledge of mysticism is based on the study of texts,” and, “the study of mysticism is primarily, if not exclusively, a philological and an exegetical enterprise” (Keller 95). Nonetheless, the corporeal effects of Gemma’s spiritual life, alternately inspiring rapture or mortification, agony or ecstasy, have become, in their transformative miraculousness (or, in the adverse interpretation, in their hysterical psychopathology) the sole focus of both proponents’ and adversaries’ attention. Gemma Galgani has been repeatedly distorted into an anachronistically medieval figure, seemingly frozen in time. But if, on the one hand, for the believer her eccentricity has turned her into an icon of nostalgic devotion or a throwback to the golden age of mysticism, on the other hand, her contemporaneity with the golden age of positivistic psychiatry

and the birth of psychoanalysis has made her an easy target of "hysterization."<sup>1</sup>

Still, Gemma Galgani can and indeed should be studied without falling into the ahistorical essentialism of her adorers, but also without yielding to the hysterizing operation of her antagonists. For just as we must grant a relative autonomy to the spiritual dimension, it also cannot be denied that Gemma Galgani's mysticism, both bodily and verbal, is necessarily articulated within the historical framework of the discourses of her time — most prominently, medicine and religion. And it is the competition between these two opposing and yet colluding strategies of control that changes the turn-of-the-century mystic's apparently private and internal calling into a public event, fashioning out of Gemma a silent battleground still waiting for us to return to her a mirror and a voice.

In what follows, I will first analyze the silencing of Gemma Galgani by both medical and religious discourse. For just as medieval Christianity troped the flesh as feminine (and the spirit as masculine),<sup>2</sup> so also turn-of-the-century medicine (an analogously hegemonic discourse) reduced woman to her body — and, more specifically, to her intrinsically hysterical reproductive apparatus. To these readings I would like then to juxtapose, with an intentionally abrupt transition, a reading of Gemma Galgani's own written self-interpretation, in the course of which she recuperates her worldly powerlessness and transforms it into a strategy of spiritual and physical self-control; in this process, her writings permanently destabilize the interpreters' visual reductions of Gemma to a docile and voiceless victim.

But, first, a short biography of this little-known young saint may be in order. Gemma Galgani was born near Lucca in 1878, the daughter of a well-to-do pharmacist. Between the ages of eight and nineteen, she lost both her parents and brother — and with them, all of her worldly possessions. She then moved in with the Giannini family in Lucca, where she had an unspecified role between guest and servant. Her social disempowerment was crucial to her self-perception: she refers to herself as orphaned and homeless, signing her name as "la povera Gemma." Gemma Galgani always remained at the margins of the family unit and religious life. Although she repeatedly tried to enter the convent, she was always refused, because, to quote her, "ho una malattia chiamata isterismo" (a rather innocent self-accusation: she had originally misspelled this incriminating disease

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "hysterization" drawing from one of Michel Foucault's definitions as the process whereby the female body "was integrated into the sphere of medical practices by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it" (*History of Sexuality* 104).

<sup>2</sup> On this subject, see Walker Bynum's chapter "'... And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, and Finke's chapter "The Grotesque Mystical Body: Representing the Woman Writer," in *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing*.

as "esterismo" 26),<sup>3</sup> and because "non ho nulla nulla, sono senza babbo e mamma, e senza quattrini" (123). The latter reason is much more polemical ("una ragione grossa," Gemma calls it), since it links the ability to enter a convent with the worldly power of being backed up by one's family and, more importantly, by its monetary contribution to the Church.<sup>4</sup>

Prevented as she was from becoming a nun, Gemma nevertheless started donning black and long nun-like clothes, forging for herself a role with a uniform in spite of the unwillingness of the Church to officially give her one. Gemma's "caratterino" can also be seen time and again in the course of her *Autobiografia*, where we read of the many times when she either hid things from her first confessor or downright lied to him: about her stigmata and vows, about penances that she was doing "senza permesso di nessuno e solo di mia testa" (103), and about her going to someone else for spiritual guidance when her confessor's advice went against her desires. In fact, she returns to her Thursday and Friday activities (the participation in Christ's Passion that brought on her stigmata) in spite of her confessor's explicit prohibitions. Her recurrent illness was finally identified as a form of tuberculosis — which, like hysteria (also one of Gemma Galgani's ailments, according to some), was a frequent diagnosis for women in nineteenth-century Europe, and one highly conducive to metaphorical interpretations (discussed at length by Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor*). In 1899 Gemma received the stigmata (she is the first and only canonized stigmatic of the twentieth century), as well as other mystical graces such as visions, frequent ecstasies, levitation, mystical marriage, rapture of the heart, and so on. She died of tuberculosis at twenty-five, of the same illness and at the same age as her more famous French contemporary Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, and was canonized in 1940.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Visions of the Mystic

The cultural and historical background to Gemma Galgani's life was deeply hostile to, as well as fascinated by, the sort of extraordinary phenomena at the

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<sup>3</sup> In a letter to Monsignor Volpi, Gemma writes about her diagnosis as a hysteric: "Sia pure come ha detto quel medico, che è isterismo: appunto perché è così, Gesù mi vuol più bene" (189). All quotations from Gemma Galgani's writings are taken from the collection *Gesù solo*, which includes texts from Gemma's *Lettere* and her *Estasi, Diario, Autobiografia, Scritti vari, Versi*.

<sup>4</sup> Gemma obtained her father's permission to enter the convent for some time, as she herself writes, through a "bella astuzia," because "Ogni volta che il babbo mi vedeva piangere faceva tutto quello che volevo." Unless she cried, Gemma writes, she obtained nothing (80). Gemma's ardent desire to enter the convent in spite of prohibitions, by the way, is one of the many traits that tie her to her more famous French contemporary Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (although the latter, unlike Gemma, finally succeeds).

<sup>5</sup> At their death, Gemma had just turned 25, and Thérèse was three months away from her 25th birthday.



center of her short existence. At this time the hysteric-mystic identification was "scientifically" constructed by positivist medicine, and Gemma, a turn-of-the-century mystic recognized as such by the Catholic Church, provides an eloquent "case-study" in the unraveling of this construction. But in the course of this "deconstructive" process one is bound to discover the effective collusion between medical and religious interpretations of Gemma in spite of the apparent irreconcilability of their paradigms. This collusion depends on a common objectifying vision or gaze by medicine and religion, equally aimed at making the mystic's opaque body into the transparent site of a strategy of control. Thus Gemma feels compelled to plead with Christ: "ti chiedo che tu mi nasconda agli occhi di tutti" (239).

Gemma Galgani's antagonistic historical-hermeneutic background can best be illustrated through two literary quotations from texts of her time, namely Federico de Roberto's *I viceré* (1894) and Antonio Fogazzaro's *Piccolo mondo moderno* (1901): just two of the many turn-of-the-century literary texts that, overtly or covertly, in depth or superficially, explore the more curious phenomena of mysticism. In De Roberto's dialogue between the skeptical Consalvo Uzeda and his devout sister Teresa (whom he later considers affected by "hysterical mysticism" 622), Teresa talks about a peasant girl who bleeds every Friday in sweet-smelling stigmata, attracting the curious looks of those around her. Consalvo replies:

"Questi li chiami segni della Grazia? Sono fenomeni isterici!"

. . . "Se fossero fenomeni isterici, i dottori l'avrebbero curata. Invece, nessuno di quanti l'hanno vista ha saputo spiegare queste manifestazioni; tutti i loro pretesi rimedi sono rimasti inefficaci. . . . Sulla fronte le appare una macchia rossa in forma di croce, sul costato la figura del giglio. . . ." A voce più bassa aggiunse: "Monsignore andrà a visitarla."

"Vedrà anche il costato?"

Ella si trasse indietro, i suoi sguardi espressero uno sdegnato biasimo. . . .

Egli la considerò un poco. Voleva dirle: "A chi la dai a intendere? . . . Sei ammatita come tutti i nostri? . . ."

(618-19, emphasis mine)

This argument, staging the encounter of faith and skepticism, purity and lewdness, sanity and madness, is no fictional invention, for it accurately depicts the two dominant turn-of-the-century views of mystical phenomena: as hysterical and sexualized events (for doctors and skeptics), or, from the opposite perspective, as the pure signs of spiritual election (for the community of believers). In *Piccolo mondo moderno*, the skeptical asylum director claims about Piero Maironi that

l'inserviente gli ha veduto fare delle stranezze gravissime, gemere, guardare il Crocifisso con una faccia di allucinato. Lei mi dirà che anche i santi

facevano cose simili. Io rispetto i santi, non voglio discutere nemmeno santa Teresa; ma crede Lei che ve ne siano ancora, santi? Ne dubito! Adesso vi è l'isterismo e vi è la mania religiosa.

(371-72, emphasis mine)

The director's supposed respect for the saints (*even* for the difficult Saint Teresa, by his own avowal) is coupled with the disbelief in the existence of a modern saint, made impossible by present history and the dominance, in it, of neurosis. Hysteria and/or religious mania are posited as the contemporary manifestations of sanctity. Furthermore, in both De Roberto's and Fogazzaro's passages, the mystic's sanctity or madness is supposedly established through a use of sight bordering on voyeurism, be it metonymized by the inquiring eyes of the Monsignor in *I viceré* — tinged with the possibility of sexual titillation by the mystic's bare chest — or by the puzzled gaze of the janitor in *Piccolo mondo moderno* — and in this case it is the mystic himself who is suspected of being titillated by the crucifix, through the ambiguous connotations of the verb "gemere."

As one can easily imagine from these references dating from that era, the diagnosis of Gemma Galgani as a hysteric, also founded on the doctor's sight, was frequent during her lifetime as well as in the process of her canonization. Her controversial stigmata led to a medical checkup by a Doctor Pfanner, who on that occasion said: "Vedete, vedete, è tutto effetto dell'isterismo. Hanno bisogno di fare così, in queste malattie. Si bucano con spille, con aghi, ecc." (Margnelli 65).<sup>6</sup> These words unequivocally point to the interpretive strategy that makes of the mystic a hysteric, namely her reduction to flesh: the female body as the object of knowledge *par excellence*, the privileged metonymy of nature to man's culture. Hence derives the subsequent emphasis on a debunking and truth-telling vision: "vedete, vedete," is what the doctor states, and not, perhaps, "ascoltate" — although Gemma Galgani wrote and spoke profusely. But medical diagnoses of the mystic as hysteric ignore her words and focus on her looks (as can be seen in all-too-many medical and psychological texts, from Jean-Martin Charcot to Jacques Lacan). This medical emphasis on the sense of sight as a truth-telling vision finds its origin, in turn, as Michel Foucault has shown, in the early nineteenth century, when, with the "birth of the clinic," the loquacious medical gaze was established as the doctor's primary diagnostic tool: "The clinical gaze," as Foucault puts it ventriloquizing the clinician's own perspective, "is a gaze that burns things to their furthest truth" (*Birth of the Clinic* 120).

Emily Apter has appropriately spoken of the "*oculocentric* bias within

<sup>6</sup> Margnelli later describes how "il dottor Pfanner dichiara al primo colpo d'occhio che Gemma Galgani è isterica e passa vari minuti inginocchiato a terra, cercando sul pavimento e sotto il letto lo spillo con cui la stigmatizzata si sarebbe punta" (68).

French psychoanalytic culture" (XII). Indeed, the medical gaze that Jean-Martin Charcot "successfully" linked with the interpretation of women mystics is busily at work even as late as the nineteen-seventies, when one of the most prominent thinkers of this century, Jacques Lacan, also uses vision as a proof of the mystic's not-so-covert hyper-eroticism. Like Breuer and the others, Lacan targets Teresa of Avila and, more precisely, Bernini's famous sculptoreal representation of her ecstasy. In his seminar on femininity (*Encore*, 1972-1973), Lacan exclaimed, after mentioning the Flemish mystic Hadewijch of Antwerp, that "it is the same as for Saint Theresa — you have to only go and look at Bernini's statue in Rome to understand immediately that she's coming, there is no doubt about it" (Lacan 147). Like his turn-of-the-century predecessors, Lacan — like Gemma's doctor Pfanner — aims at silencing the mystic (who is thus subjected rather than subject) even as the critic/doctor is mesmerized, if not downright titillated, by her looks. But, as Luce Irigaray has combatively replied,

interpreting them [women] where they exhibit only their muteness means subjecting them to a language that exiles them at an ever increasing distance from what perhaps they would have said to you, were already whispering to you. If only your ears were not so formless, so clogged with meaning(s), that they are closed to what does not in some way echo the already heard.

(*This Sex Which Is Not One* 112-13)

Medical and psychological diagnoses of the woman mystic as hysteric or as erotomaniac exile her words in a fascination with the look of her ecstasy, in an ambiguous dialectic of desire. As Barthes states in *A Lover's Discourse*, "*To scrutinize* means *to frisk*: I am frisking the other's body, as if I wanted to see what is inside it, as if the mechanical cause of my desire were in the adverse body" (71).<sup>7</sup> The mechanics of medical and religious interpretations of Gemma Galgani are analogous to what Barthes describes as a *modus operandi* of desire, in an act of visual frisking that even for the lover, Barthes contends, "is conducted in a cold and astonished fashion" (71). The coldness of the scientific gaze and the astonishment of the religious eye become indistinguishable in their common desire — both astonished and cold — to search the mystic's flesh.

For the curiosity-riddled gaze of the clinician can also be detected in religious representations of Gemma Galgani. This spectacularization is obvious in the hagiographic emphasis on her photographs, taken by a member of the Giannini household at the somewhat odd request of Gemma's confessor, Father Germano. The interpretation of these photographs needs to be put in its historical context, since in the late nineteenth century, when photography was increasingly popular, it was a most fashionable scientific enterprise to

<sup>7</sup> I am changing Howard's translation of "fouiller" as "search" into "frisk."



photograph hysterical women in vaguely religious poses.<sup>8</sup> Medically, the photograph of the hysteric (and of the mystic *qua* hysteric) was an experimental and an archival procedure. But both medically and religiously the photograph was a pedagogical means of transmission, a way of spreading a certain "truth" — whether this "truth" be the materialistic ideology of positivism, or the Catholic one of the cult of saints. For it is in the nature of photography to point to the existence of a referent for its signifier: "The photograph," as Barthes puts it in *Camera lucida*, "is literally an emanation of the referent" (80), and its "essence is to ratify what it represents" (85), since "In Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*" (76). It is through this quality (to which we must add a certain measure of visual titillation) that photography provides an instrument for both diagnosis and canonization. Both in method and purpose, then, the two apparently antagonistic discourses of medicine and religion come to strangely coincide in objectifying the mystic as a visual icon and in distancing themselves from her uncomfortable voice.

Thus also the principal hagiographical work on Gemma Galgani, Enrico Zoffoli's *La povera Gemma*, contains parts entitled "Il volto," "Costituzione e aspetto," "Gemma era bella." Accordingly, Gemma Galgani's body testifies to her transcendence. Zoffoli, recuperating physiognomy, claims that there is "una meravigliosa sintonia tra il visibile e l'invisibile, *il volto e l'anima*, le sembianze esterne e la vita che si svolge nel mistero" (419). He also writes that "Una vocazione tanto singolare doveva trasparire anche dai suoi grandi occhi di estatica" (396). Gemma's mysticism is clearly legible, even "transparent," on her beautiful although (or perhaps because) suffering body. Indeed, Zoffoli's corporeal exegesis goes further when he rhetorically asks: "L'ascesi, del resto, soggiogando la carne, non rende forse l'involucro corporeo più sottile, capace di mostrare i segreti e profondi rilievi dello spirito?" (419). It is not only asceticism — in itself, a *mort*-ification — but also illness that dematerializes Gemma's body, forcing it into a transparency that reveals its secrets to both doctors and the faithful.

Be it in order to diagnose her or to canonize her, Gemma Galgani's appearance is an essential attribute of hers. Her beauty is stressed time and again as an unequivocal sign of spiritual election. The fascination with framing her tubercular body is analogous to that cult of invalidism so popular in romantic and post-romantic literature. Just as the observers of Thérèse of Lisieux's death commented that at that moment her beauty was ravishing (Magli 38), so also the recorded reactions to Gemma's ecstasies focussed on her beauty: "Com'era bella!" (Zoffoli 407).<sup>9</sup> This attribute, by the way, brings Gemma Galgani close to her

<sup>8</sup> On hysteria and photography in late-nineteenth-century France, see Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie*.

<sup>9</sup> Sontag correctly points out that "The dying tubercular is pictured as made more beautiful and

vision of God as Christ: “quanto è bello il mio Gesù!,” she exclaims in her diary (62), a closeness reinforced by the fact that, as Finke notes, “The central act of Christianity is Christ’s assumption of a body that can be — and is — wounded, opened up by torture” (92).

Analogously, Gemma Galgani’s appearance is inextricably tied to her tuberculosis and her stigmata, to a bloody illness and bleeding wounds that define her flesh as fissured and wounded — like Christ’s (whose “piaghe aperte” Gemma describes as “belle” 63). Hers is an “open” beauty always in the process of undoing itself and the body that is its material support. Through these physical and symbolic apertures, the borders of Gemma’s self are threatened and destabilized; they are made permeable through what Julia Kristeva has called “the abjection of self”: that mechanism of self-abasement through which the subject discovers that her (or his) very being is “impossible,” based on a loss or a want. Indeed, according to Kristeva, “Mystical Christendom turned this abjection of self into the ultimate proof of humility before God” (Kristeva 5): the mystic’s very self, body and soul, is forfeited in the course of self-abjection. Yet the mystic’s familiarity with this loss, with abjection, constitutes “the most propitious place for communication” because it leads to a point of “pure spirituality,” as well as “a fount of infinite jouissance” (127).

For Gemma Galgani, suffering in the form of *imitatio Christi* is, like abjection, a transgressive practice overstepping the boundaries of the body, the distinctions between inside and outside, between self and Other, thus disturbing the very notion of identity: “Mi avvicino a dimattina,” Gemma writes to Father Germano, “Gesù possederà me e io possederò Gesù” (160). In another letter she states: “Gesù è mio, ed io sono sua” (183). To quote from Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* again, “I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be ‘me.’ Not at all an Other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be” (10): a psychoanalytic definition that uncannily resembles the very essence of mystical experience. For in the course of her mystical practice, as in the course of her interpretations, Gemma Galgani is continuously turned inside out and outside in. It is almost as if the interpretation and self-interpretation of her identity when she was alive anticipated the spectacular autopsy she was to undergo after death, carried out with the curious purpose of discovering what secrets she physically contained. In a more positive key, the heterogeneous presence of Christ within Gemma through her stigmata, the rapture of her heart, her wearing the crown of thorns, her lending a flesh — her flesh — to the Word: all this constitutes a practice analogous to the transubstantiation in the Eucharist. And as the Word is enfleshed, so also the mystic’s flesh — again, *her* flesh — acquires a spiritual status. It is, once and

for all, redeemed.

The question of the turn-of-the-century clinician may then still haunt today's reader. Was Gemma Galgani a hysteric? I believe this is an imaginary, unanswerable, and, ultimately, useless question. In hysteria the word is given a body, troped as the material support of an unconscious syntax, and the discourse of psychiatry has gone to great lengths to equate the language of the hysterical symptom with the affective mystic's spelling of Christ's Word. Yet this pathologizing definition of mysticism — and particularly of women's mysticism — constitutes another move in medicine's colonization of the body, aimed at imbricating the mystic's ecstasy with the hysteric's agony by claiming that the eloquent mystic is always-already a babbling hysteric. This turn-of-the-century diagnosis fails to take into account the fundamental contrast between the mystic's joy in spirituality, the recognizable harmony between her visions and her conscious beliefs, as opposed to the meaninglessly violent quality of the hysteric's hallucinatory crises. Even in the course of her most painful experience, when she receives for the first time her stigmata, Gemma Galgani writes: "Quei dolori, quelle pene, anziché affliggermi, mi recavano una pace perfetta" (101) — an inner peace that is never the result of the hysteric's symptomatology, the hysteric being incapable of articulating the "traumatic reminiscences" at the root of her condition. Gemma Galgani's self-conscious and even systematic practice of converting the bodily into the spiritual, however, remains, in spite of her hysterization, an eloquent anti-diagnosis we cannot afford to ignore.

### 3. Mystical Visions

Let us move, then, from looking at Gemma Galgani to, finally, listening to her voice. I would like to turn now to an analysis of how Gemma read and construed her own self in her writings, of how she translated into language, covertly or explicitly, the relation between spirit and body, agony and ecstasy, mysticism and hysteria, offering to herself and her reader a possible way out of these labyrinthian dualisms.

Gemma Galgani's written production is expressed within the parameters of women's mysticism, in quasi-private and non-systematic genres. As it has been said about the English medieval mystics Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, Gemma is among those who "discover and reveal themselves in discovering and revealing the other" (Mason 22). Her writings, marginalized and dismissed by tradition as what has been defined as "the noise of history" — i.e., as an unnecessary and irrelevant detail (in Laurie Finke's elaboration of Michel Serres's concept) — include a *Diario* of just a few months, written in 1900 at the request of her first confessor Monsignor Giovanni Volpi (her second confessor made her interrupt it); an autobiography in the form of a general confession, written in 1901 at the request of her second and most important confessor, the Passionist Father Germano Ruoppolo; a hefty collection of



letters, chiefly addressed to her two spiritual directors; and, finally, her “ecstasies,” namely the words pronounced while the saint was in ecstasy and hastily written down, unbeknownst to her, by the women in the Giannini family — who unwittingly took up a role analogous to that of Saint Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi’s fellow carmelites.

The uneasiness that Gemma Galgani’s story provokes in the contemporary reader is not likely to be relieved by a study of these texts, which her principal hagiographer, with a characteristic hermeneutic move, relates to her ailing body: “quando prende la penna,” Enrico Zoffoli writes, “sembra che voglia operare una trasfusione del suo sangue” (447). Hagiographically yet also reductively, Zoffoli underlines the intersection between Gemma’s body and her speech, and thus the distance between her writings (disorganic, ever-entangled with her daily life and experiences) and the rigorously speculative rhetoric of (male) theology. The interpretation of Gemma Galgani’s writings is no easy task. For Gemma does not possess the self-conscious authority of earlier mystics such as Angela of Foligno or Catherine of Siena. Yet the medical and religious silencings of her voice point to the difficulties raised by her enunciations. Like medical and religious discourses, the contemporary reader is likely to be troubled by Gemma’s sentimentality and infantilism: a trouble eloquently, if somewhat mercilessly, summarized by Giovanni Pozzi and Claudio Leonardi in the introduction to Gemma Galgani in their anthology of Italian women mystics: “Sono querule pretese di coccolamenti e carezze, lagne interminabili, capricciose ritorsioni e ritratti piagnucolosi, conditi per sovrappiù con gli ingredienti rugiadosi e melensi della paccottiglia devota ottocentesca” (639). In its harshness, this sentence must remind us of the relativity of every esthetic judgment. In order to truly “read” Gemma Galgani’s writings we must force ourselves to rethink some of our (culturally specific) critical assumptions and rankings, both literary and religious. For Gemma, it can be argued, often uses textual mechanisms (again, literary or religious) anamorphically in order to critically subvert the only apparently self-destructive posture. She challenges, as well as — it cannot be denied — accomodates the ideology that would simplistically dismiss her on the basis of an imaginary universal esthetic canon.

The peculiar and demystifying relationship Gemma entertains with her God, for instance, rejects the claim of divine unrepresentability and of negativity as the privileged way of acceding to the divine. Positive mysticism has traditionally been gendered as women’s mysticism and, as Sarah Beckwith has shown in a masterful essay on Margery Kempe, “Positive mysticism has the potential to embarrass [the] claim to unrepresentability and reveal the extraordinarily heavy ideological investment in the immateriality, the unrepresentability of God in his function as the Other” (40). Some of the reasons for Gemma Galgani’s silencings may indeed be found in her writings as they diverge from standard representations of both the divine and the feminine.

In mystical union, as it is well known, the boundaries between self and

Other — in Gemma's case, of her soul and Christ — are blurred. On one hand, Gemma approximates herself to Christ in their common passivity and submission. In her *Diario* (July 19, 1900) she writes: "mi rispose Gesù: 'Io ti amo tanto, perché molto mi somigli'. 'In che cosa, o Gesù — gli dissi — ché mi vedo tanto dissimile a te?' 'Nell'essere umiliata', mi rispose" (48). Gemma also describes her penniless condition, her "vivere di carità degli altri," as "la cosa che mi rende somigliante a Gesù" (152), and she repeatedly compares herself to Christ through the privileged metonymy of the heart: "il vostro Cuore è della stessa natura del mio; ciò che fa beato Voi può fare beata pure anche me!" (175) — an analogy aided by the exchange of her heart with Christ's, a mystical grace Gemma repeatedly experienced in the course of her last few years. Furthermore, Gemma uses for Jesus, as she does for herself, the attribute "povero" and the acclamation "evviva" (144, 149, etc.). This identification of Gemma with Jesus is made possible by the fact that, according to Beckwith writes about Margey Kempe, both Christ and the woman mystic function "as an exchange object to guarantee and ratify the mutually beneficial hierarchy of God and man" (48). Paradoxically, victimization allows Gemma's mimesis of Christ's Passion through a strategy that necessarily implies a form of subjection, but also of subversion.

For the self-abnegation displayed by Gemma Galgani as a sort of guarantee of her close relationship with God is destabilized by her assertion appearing in a diary entry: "Mi aggiunse poi il mio Dio che col tempo Egli mi avrebbe fatta santa," immediately adding in humbling parentheses, "(qui non dico nulla perché è impossibile che accada di me, quel che disse Lui)" (48). But despite her own protestations of humility she not only affirms but repeats and indeed elaborates on her self-prophecies a year later, when in a letter she reports Christ's words to her: "Assicuralo che sono Io, Gesù, che ti parlo, e che fra qualche anno per opera mia tu sarai Santa, farai miracoli, e sarai agli onori degli altari" (199-200). Along similar lines she exclaims to Christ in the course of an ecstasy: "Non sai che io ho l'ordine dal Confessore di farmi presto santa, e presto presto?" (265). So also in another letter she begins: "Non più povera Gemma, ma evviva Gemma!" (144), an acclamation that, following the language of popular devotion, Gemma reserves to Christ and the saints.<sup>10</sup>

The repeated prediction of her future canonization vociferously exceeds the limits imposed on the mystic's — and especially the woman mystic's — self-representation. Analogously excessive, or transgressive, is Gemma Galgani's wish to become Christ's lover, which she simply yet unambiguously expresses

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<sup>10</sup> Another sign of Gemma's "caratterino" can be found in one of her letters to her second confessor, in which she assures Father Germano of her intercession for him in Heaven: "vedrà quello che gli farò. . . vedrà . . . cosa farò per lei quando sarò in Paradiso: lo trascinerò con me ad ogni costo!" (183).

in one of her ecstasies: “Mi sarai sempre padre, ed io sarò sempre tua figlia fedele e, se ti piace, sarò tua amante . . .” (Pozzi and Leonardi 642).<sup>11</sup> In his introductory essay to *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, Giovanni Pozzi points out that, although the relationship between bride and bridegroom is constantly evoked by women mystics, it is only Gemma who takes its eroticism to its logical limit by expressing the desire to become not only Christ’s bride or fiancée but also his lover (40). Equally excessive and anti-apophatic are Gemma’s representations of Jesus as someone who jokes with her (“mi pare quasi che scherzi quando ci parlo” 135), and who can alternately be “serio e un po’ arrabbiato” (47) or teasingly amused, as when she writes: “Non mi è parso che Gesù, quando mi parlò del convento nuovo, dicesse che io dovevo starci; mi pare di no, anzi se glielo dimando, non mi risponde, ride” (137). These words form a laughing (if uncomfortable) portrayal of the divinity analogous to that of her guardian angel, who, like Jesus, is in the habit of teasing Gemma, of laughing “forte forte” while in her company (69), of pulling her hair when she misbehaves (198), and of giving her healing cups of delicious coffee (66).

But this childlike light-heartedness (she even has nicknames for the devil, such as “chiappino” and “berliffio”) is by no means pervasive in Gemma’s writings. It is easy to see that Gemma tends to reject her body and its feelings as the “object” over which she ascetically seeks to triumph. She contemptuously describes her body as “la carnaccia” and “questo letamaio di corpo,” and herself as “una creatura di fango” (167, 174, 252). She wore no stockings in winter, wore a cilice under her clothes until her confessor forbade her from doing so (103 n.), and stated to the Virgin Mary (whom she calls “Mamma”) that for Jesus “non curo più neppure il corpo” (72). Indeed, during an ecstasy she asks Jesus to break her free from the chains of her body, viewed as the prison of the soul and the origin of its limits: “rompila, Gesù, la catena che mi tiene unita al corpo, Gesù . . .” (235). Beyond its superficial rejection of the fleshly, this prayer alludes to the manipulation intrinsic to Gemma Galgani’s (and other mystics’) conformity to the practice of bodily mortification, namely, her self-empowerment, through self-torture, to transcend the physical so as to accede to the spiritual. As Finke claims about medieval mystics, self-torture “constructs the female body as a reflexive locus of power” by making the mystic “both victim and torturer, she who is marked and she who marks” (95). This doubleness of experiences, for women mystics, “becomes a means to achieve a representational power — as both object and subject — at the very moments they seem bent on annihilating themselves” (98).

Clearly, physical suffering is not at all perceived by the mystic as a confining limit, as powerlessness; accordingly, the chastising of the flesh does

<sup>11</sup> It is perhaps significant that the hagiographically inclined editor of *Gesù solo* has not reproduced this particular ecstasy.



not necessarily imply silence and self-annihilation. As the great scholar of mysticism Michel de Certeau explains in *The Mystic Fable*, the rejection of the body "constitutes the point of departure for the task of offering a body to the spirit, of "incarnating" discourse, giving truth a space to make itself manifest" (1: 80). The body is only apparently a hindrance to salvation; it is in reality the best opportunity, for the mystic, to ascend to God. And in a religion founded on the loss of the body of Christ in the crucifixion and its recovery in the Eucharist, it is precisely Christ's body that the mystic — and certainly Gemma Galgani — seeks to recover by corporealizing Christ's Passion. In Gemma's mystical practice, the Word definitively becomes flesh. According to many critics, this transformation is aided in women mystics by the underlying identification in Western culture of the feminine with the fleshly. This process takes place most spectacularly in her stigmata and in her own heart's self-transforming identification with the Sacred Heart of Christ. This transformation is analogous to, although not quite as spectacular as, Saint Chiara of Montefalco's, in whose autopsied heart were found etched the instruments in miniature of Christ's Passion (Camporesi 3-9).

Gemma Galgani's relation to her body, then, seems contradictory or heterogeneous in more ways than one, because her flesh is both the material source of a transgressive drive and the immaterial locus of spirituality. On one hand Gemma seems prey to her body. For example, the expression she uses to describe her experience of ecstasy is "andar" or "portar via la testa" or "il capo," as if her head were outside her control both during and before the ecstatic experience. (So also other parts of her body are taken away, most frequently her heart, but at time even her hands and feet of her whole body: 145). On the other hand, in her moments of apparent self-doubt, inciting her confessors not to attribute any value to her words, she states that her visions were "tutta mia fantasia" (47, 73, 191, etc.), thus reclaiming an odd and indeed a risky sort of authority over her experiences, especially over the only apparently passive experience of suffering with Christ, her com-Passion. Precisely because this "fantasia" of hers, or perhaps this madness, the imagination of "cose impossibili" (115), the fruit of a head that Gemma time and again describes as "un po' mattuccia" (115, 121),<sup>12</sup> is in striking harmony with her religious beliefs, she steadfastly follows it in spite of any spiritual and physical danger in doing so. Repeatedly, but always self-consciously, Gemma Galgani crosses the line between socially accepted sanity and divinely inspired madness. And her wilfulness, the triumph of subversion over subservience, is obvious when she tells Jesus that she will obey him at any cost and risk, regardless of the opposition of Church and society: "Sia pure tutta la mia fantasia, sia pure lavoro

<sup>12</sup> Gemma even states that "andando via Gesù, mi ha portato via anche il cervello. Davvero, veh!" (142).

del diavolo, in ogni modo voglio obbedire" (48). Once again she underlines the authority she is self-consciously exerting over her religious experiences as well as over her psyche. So also when she quotes Jesus's words she claims that it was her own head that ventriloquized God, identifying the two as one: "mi parve che Gesù (ovvero la mia testa) non mi lasciasse finire di parlare . . ." (123).

But since body and mind are inseparable for Gemma, her spiritual battles affect both. She claims that a quarrel with her adoptive aunt, for instance, "ha giovato prima per l'anima e poi per il corpo" (177), by allowing her to chastise her "lingua lunga" through a repressing effort that involves her entire body: "ebbi tanto a soffrire per reprimermi che il mio corpo se ne risentì assai" (177). Through asceticism, Gemma brings to bear over her body a similarly iron discipline: "sto bene assai, oppure, è meglio che non dica bugie, soffro ma sto zitta" (149); "La carnaccia si vuol sempre lamentare, ma l'addomesticherei bene io, se potessi ottenere da Lei di . . . fare" (167); "E la mia carne, Gesù, ci penserò io a non lamentarsi e a farla stare zitta" (234). Interestingly enough, in this last statement Gemma Galgani unambiguously expresses the wish to literally silence the very flesh that her observers, including those intent on canonizing her, were zealously inciting to speech.

In her oscillations between control over the self and yielding to the Other, "la povera Gemma" — orphaned, homeless, penniless — dramatizes the difficulties she encountered in the wilful renunciation to what little she had authority over: her self, body, and psyche. She finally sheds her body and her entire self as Francis of Assisi once stripped himself of his clothes and riches: "Non so dirgli né dargli nulla," she admits in a letter about her relationship with Christ, "ma giacché non so far niente, oggi stesso a Lui mi consacro tutta quale sono, senza alcuna riserba" (173). And she later exclaims in the course of an ecstasy, just a few months before her death: "O mio Dio. . . Guardami di cima in fondo: non ho nulla, son tutta rovinata, proprio non ho nulla da darti. Illuminami, se vuoi che ti dia. Ah, ora mi viene in mente. Questa vita che tu mi hai dato e conservato con tanta forza d'amore, questa vita te la sacrifico. Ebbene, o Signore, io non ci ho altro da darti" (263). In her body and soul, inseparably linked, Gemma Galgani has found an offering in spite of the total disenfranchisement imposed on her by her social condition. She who was so powerless over everything else in her life, in the course of her mystical experiences has successfully established that hers was indeed an offering she controlled and enjoyed: an offering, that is, worthy of that name.

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## Ideologia, creatività e iconografia nella Chiara di Liliana Cavani

### 1. Ideologia di un modello femminile totalizzante

**A**tribuire alla cultura medievale un alto grado di misoginia è validare un'ovvietà. Si tratta di esaminare se, all'interno di una rete di relazioni tradizionalmente definite, si possa individuare un modello femminile totalizzante, veicolo e filtro di una immagine protomoderna. La società medievale è contrassegnata da una marcata segnicità; alla sua concezione del mondo pertiene la separazione dell'essenza reale del mondo fenomenico. Nell'ambito di questa cultura, ha ricordato Maria Corti, solo i *signa* trasmettono conoscenza (*Il viaggio testuale* 223). È da individuare, pertanto, in che termini, nei secoli XII e XIII, si manifesti un processo di semiosi complementare che investe le strutture gnoseologiche del concreto e del sensibile verso l'astratto e l'intuitivo, determinando una verifica delle forme e dei limiti dei sistemi canonici di differenziazione sessuale. A questa attività speculativa si ascrive la concettualizzazione e l'iconografia del personaggio di Chiara di Assisi nel *Francesco* (1989) di Liliana Cavani.<sup>1</sup>

La tradizione filosofica medievale interpreta la natura e il posto della donna nella società secondo parametri scritturali di inferiorità fisiologica e teologica. Nel film della Cavani la rappresentazione simbolica del femminile si estirpa da questa tradizione secondo un procedimento interpretativo che rispecchia, con creatività, l'umanesimo cristiano e il pensiero evangelico. La regista di Carpi fonda la sua riflessione teologica dell'esperienza mistica di Chiara sulla parabolica ricerca di sé; una religiosità che è potenziamento dell'*essere*, non

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<sup>1</sup> La mia analisi del personaggio di Chiara si concentrerà su questo secondo film della Cavani su Francesco di Assisi. Il primo, apparso sui teleschermi italiani nel maggio del 1966, con Lou Castel come attore protagonista, non affronta un discorso sistematico su Chiara. Ammette la stessa regista: "La prima Chiara non l'avevo capita. La vedevo cioè come una fanciulla vaga". L'intervista, rilasciata il 27 giugno del 1989, è stata pubblicata quasi integralmente (Marrone, "L'attualità di *Francesco*: Incontro con Liliana Cavani").

un'astratta vocazione a rimuoversi dai fenomeni del reale. L'intenzione di ricostruire l'identità di Chiara non è quindi legata alla autorevolezza di una ricontestualità storica del personaggio, bensì a quella di proiettare la gravidanza del suo esperimento in un modello autonomo di santità femminile, da lei stessa figurato. Se, infatti, negli ultimi anni, seri studi filologici hanno indagato la complessità presentata dalla vita e dagli scritti delle mistiche del medioevo, su Chiara di Assisi il materiale critico rimane ancor limitato, causa la scarsità delle fonti storicamente accreditate.<sup>2</sup>

Nell'inquadrare la significazione simbolica del discorso cristiano di Chiara, Liliana Cavani la immette nell'itinerario dell'esperienza francescana e nella retorica dell'*exemplum* come simbolo di un rinnovamento epistemologico dell'intero *milieu* culturale del tempo. La contestualizzazione di Chiara è per *analogia visionis*; l'*imitatio* di Francesco comprende i concetti di espansione e di sublimazione in un'unica fonte di verità, il cui testo primario è l'icona del Cristo. La figlia del nobile cavaliere Favarone di Offreduccio ed il figlio del mercante Pietro Bernardone partecipano a una nuova epistemologia valorizzante i *topoi* che segnalano le sfasature delle infrastrutture sociali del Duecento, e le loro irreversibili trasformazioni. Accade che "la nuova ideologia della nascente società mercantile e cittadina rende inattuali i vecchi modelli, le vecchie strutture semiotiche" (Corti, *Il viaggio testuale* 227). In essenza, l'esperienza mistica di Chiara è premessa a un modello femminile totalizzante, fonte esemplare per illuminare la corporeità dell'emblematico insegnamento francescano. L'esperimento è lo strumento attraverso il quale parlano le fonti, l'unica possibile via alla perfezione e alla conoscenza di sé. Nel Francescanesimo delle origini, la teologia implica la conoscenza del concreto, l'attuabilità del contatto (*tactus* e *gustus*) del soggetto con la realtà spirituale (Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 40-41). In tal senso, è fondamentale l'uso portante del corpo.

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<sup>2</sup> Per uno studio delle fonti storiche maggiori (il Processo, la Bolla di canonizzazione *Clara claris praeclara meritis*, e la *Legenda*) e degli scritti clariani si rimanda in particolare ai seguenti volumi e alle loro bibliografie: *Fonti francescane*; Bartoli, *Chiara d'Assisi*; Calati, *La spiritualità del medioevo*; Carney, *The First Franciscan Woman. Clare of Assisi and Her Form of Life*; Augusta, *Santa Chiara d'Assisi*; Chiara, *Francescanesimo al femminile*, a cura di Davide Covi e Dino Dozzi, una ristampa del *Laurentianum* dall'omonimo titolo (31.1-2, 1990); Chiara d'Assisi, *Scritti*; Chiara di Assisi. Atti del XX Convegno Internazionale; *Claire d'Assise. Ecrits*, a cura di Marie-France Becker et al.; René-Charles Dhont, *Claire parmi ses soeurs*; P. Kajetan Esser, *Temi spirituali*; Gilliant-Smith, *Saint Clare of Assisi. Her Life and Legislation*; Pozzi-Leonardi, *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*; *Il processo di Santa Chiara d'Assisi*, a cura di Vian; Roggen, *The Spirit of St. Clare*; *Santa Chiara d'Assisi*, a cura di Casoli.



## 2. Chiara di Assisi e la transcodificazione cinematografica di Liliana Cavani

È noto che Caterina da Siena e Angela da Foligno sono generalmente ritenute le mistiche più autorevoli della tradizione italiana fino al Cinquecento. I loro testi e le loro presenze inscrivono un'autobiografia spirituale dei coevi modelli culturali e attestano, come sottolinea Marina Zancan, l'apertura a un possibile riconoscimento della matrice femminile sulla via della perfezione.<sup>3</sup> Di tale riconoscimento, Chiara di Assisi è un'antesignana suggestiva e "creatrice." Dice Cavani:

Chiara viene tramandata come un personaggio tutto incapsulato dentro la categoria del femminile, con tutti i limiti previsti dalla categoria e tutti gli entusiasmi inerenti tesi alla esaltazione della sua riservatezza, delicatezza, tenerezza, bontà, generosità, carità, insomma . . . il solito repertorio. Invece per me Chiara fu una intellettuale, fu un personaggio creativo, una donna che elaborò una personale visione del mondo e che condivise il processo creativo con Francesco. . . . Affrontare d'altra parte un personaggio femminile del medioevo è un problema serio a causa della grande censura in atto sulla donna creativa, sulla donna intellettuale.

(Cavani, "Donna e libertà d'espressione" 122)

In questi termini si fissa il quadro figurativo del percorso di Chiara, recuperando l'autonomia e l'impasto intellettuale finora negato dalla agiografia e dalle letture panegirico-elogiative a partire dalla *Legenda S. Clarae Virginis* (1256), attribuita al biografo di Francesco, Tommaso da Celano:

E, per quanto [Chiara] non fosse coltivata nelle conoscenze letterarie, godeva di ascoltare un sermone dotto, pensando che dentro il guscio delle parole si nasconde la mandorla, che ella sapeva penetrare con acutezza, assimilandone tutto il sapore e il gusto.<sup>4</sup>

La passività sopra tratteggiata rientra nella tipologia di culture ambivalenti: l'una, puramente speculare, portatrice di una segnicità che afferma un rapporto gerarchico consenziente, da *minoris iuris*;<sup>5</sup> l'altra di interazione attiva.

<sup>3</sup> In un articolo fondamentale per la comprensione della tradizione di santità femminile, la Zancan rileva che gli ordini monastici cominciarono a guardare alla donna "come a soggetti di una possibile via femminile alla perfezione" (*Lettere di Caterina da Siena* 621).

<sup>4</sup> "Leggenda di Santa Chiara Vergine," a cura di Chiara Augusta Lainati, in *Fonti francescane* 1244.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. "Chiara è ancora una debole voce: il suo legame con Francesco è troppo stretto e personale, tale da toglierle quasi la voce, o piuttosto da spingerla a dire le stesse parole di lui, del maestro e insieme compagno e padre" (Leonardi, "La santità delle donne", in *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* 49). Ne "Lo specchio di perfezione" di Frate Leone, Chiara è "singolare emulatrice" (Casoli 104).

# Commenta nuovamente la Cavani:

Chiara non fu un oggetto passivo ma *soggetto* che collaborò al progetto spirituale di Francesco al punto che se ci fosse stato un *copyright* sul progetto avrebbero dovuto firmarlo entrambi. Francesco nei momenti di incertezza, nei momenti cruciali chiedeva il parere di Chiara.<sup>6</sup>

Per Chiara, i presupposti metodologici relativi al reperimento delle fonti devono essere informati al discorso collaterale sulle fonti del modello di santità da lei attuato.<sup>7</sup> Nel contesto storico-dottrinale della mistica al femminile in Italia, il modello dominante nel secolo XIII è quello prodotto dal monachesimo e applicato ai simboli di perfezione. L'esperienza monastica è fondamentalmente definita dallo iato tra i *loci* della storia e quelli privilegiati dell'esercizio spirituale. Il monachesimo benedettino-clunicense incarna un modello alto di santità nella figura della Badessa, consentendole "una presenza sociale di rilievo ma non lo spazio per l'elaborazione di un linguaggio religioso autonomo" (Zancan 620);<sup>8</sup> qualcosa di inedito come apparenza culturale di tipo simbolico.

All'origine il modello di santità ha rispondenza negli ordini mendicanti. Chiara guarda a Francesco come all'*uomo nuovo*;<sup>9</sup> la gravidanza della sua esperienza mistica ridefinisce il *modus operandi* da lei stessa rappresentato. All'interno di un filone di spiritualità femminile che vive un rapporto simbiotico con la tradizione orale e scritta che i frati minori andavano propagando in quegli

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<sup>6</sup> Dall'intervento "Donna e libertà di espressione" presentato al Convegno-Centenario Josefa Segovia su "La donna nelle grandi trasformazioni del nostro tempo" (Roma, 15-16 maggio 1992, Centre d'Etudes Saint-Louis de France). Il testo della conferenza è stato pubblicato, con revisioni, in Cavalcanti. Si ringrazia la regista per la gentile concessione a citare dal testo integrale manoscritto. Il corsivo è nostro. Sul rapporto attivo di Chiara con Francesco si veda anche Dhont 25-26. La clarissa Chiara Augusta Lainati presenta il rapporto tra Francesco e Chiara nei termini di un "vicendevole aiuto nella ricerca e nel progresso sulla strada del volere divino. . . Chiara è per Francesco 'l'aiuto' che Dio gli mette accanto perché gli sia più facile arrivare fino a lui" (*Santa Chiara d'Assisi* 52).

<sup>7</sup> Di Chiara ci sono pervenuti cinque *Lettere*, una *Benedizione*, la *Regola*, e un *Testamento*. Solo le quattro lettere ad Agnese di Praga sono di attribuzione certa.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Sebastiani, "Cronaca e agiografia nei monasteri femminili" 160-161. Dal XII secolo alcune grandi mistiche europee traslano in scrittura la propria esperienza di perfezione. A riguardo, significative sono le forme conventuali laiche del beghinaggio. Si vedano, fra i recentissimi studi (con relative bibliografie ragionate): Zum Brunn e Epiney-Bugard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe; Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, a cura di Blumenfeld-Kosinski e Szell; Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*; Petroff, *Body and Soul. Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*; *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy*, a cura di Matter e Coakley.

<sup>9</sup> Tommaso da Celano nella "Leggenda di Santa Chiara Vergine" fa espresso riferimento alla denominazione scritturale degli Efesini, aggiungendo che Francesco "con nuove virtù rinnovava la via della perfezione" (*Fonti francescane* 1214).

anni, Chiara è consapevole di tutte le valenze di questa affiliazione. È significativo in proposito che il modello clariano non riporti all'uso coevo come indice di una marginalità rispetto alle culture dominanti (Pozzi, "L'alfabeto delle sante" 24). Ha precisato Leonardi che sono così proprio "le donne a costituirsi come vere eredi di Francesco" ("La santità delle donne" in *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* 49); poiché, nonostante la segregazione sociale dettata dalla clausura, esse non si precludono al mondo esterno. Un rapporto, questo, recentemente elucidato da Frederic Raurell, il quale ne amplia i parametri offerti dall'esegesi patristico-biblica in chiave aristotelica (Raurell 15-18).

Elemento intrinseco al percorso clariano verso Dio è l'idea del perfetto amore come potenziamento di sé, elemento che trova forte connotazione figurale nella cornice che Liliana Cavani sceglie per strutturare il suo film: i compagni, la tenda eretta nello straordinario spazio montano, e Chiara modellano una *humana hierarchia* che è metafora della edificazione verticale legata agli ideali sociali gerarchizzanti del Medioevo. Coll'innalzare la tenda sotto la quale la tradizione orale si concreterà in scrittura, la congregazione dei primi frati si mette in rapporto di inclusione con una comunità più ampia, avanzata dalla presenza autorevole di Chiara — alla cui voce fuori campo è affidato l'*incipit* del memoriale della storia: "La sua immagine ha riempito la mia esistenza fin da quando ero ragazzina."<sup>10</sup> Chiara si appresta a creare un rapporto di simbiosi fra la realtà sociale e la realtà essenziale del francescanesimo. Da una parte, l'accesso che la narratrice ha al materiale classico della tradizione è inconfutabilmente diretto; dall'altro, ella ne seleziona episodi primari della sfera privata: i suoi incontri con Francesco hanno sequenzialità rituale. La retorica del verbo clariano si affida a uno statuto linguistico liturgico che diparte dal concetto di *imago* a cui si lega, nel corso del film, l'esperienza comunicativa e unitiva della nobile assisana *ab initio*. Il primo enunciato stilistico, il *close-up* del volto di Chiara, è pregno dell'ebbrezza spirituale che investe il lodante secondo l'attributo di armonia che si riconosce nell'oggetto della lode. Contrariamente all'atteggiamento mistico nominale, l'esperienza di Chiara nel film della Cavani, pur essendo comprensiva, resiste l'annientamento di sé. La dimensione profetica con cui ella abbraccia la presenza del Cristo — e di Francesco "vero amante e imitatore di lui" ("Testamento di Santa Chiara," in *Fonti francescane* 1175) — indica un coinvolgimento dionisiaco nell'atto stesso della percezione. L'oggetto, trasfigurato e investito di una significazione simbolica intensa, emana energia. L'atteggiamento della mente di Chiara, mentre si accinge a rimembrare il

<sup>10</sup> Nella sceneggiatura, a "immagine" corrisponde "visione" (Cavani-Mazzoni, *Francesco* 8). Si noti che l'arrivo di Chiara è ripreso dall'apertura triangolare della tenda, denotando nell'insieme una sequenza stilistica iconica commentatoria alla funzione filmica del personaggio. L'operazione figurale della Cavani produce un messaggio di espansione metaforica che armonizza il sociale e l'essenziale, il maschile e il femminile. Cfr. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* 125-126.



passato, è vividamente percettivo, non contemplativo.<sup>11</sup>

La novità della Chiara filmica consiste nella voluta contaminazione che la regista effettua tra lo schema offerto dalle fonti storiche e la particolare attenzione volta allo *status* della persona nel contingente. Fuori del gruppo, previsto nel modello generale, non si esiste socialmente e culturalmente, ma solo a livello esistenziale (Corti, *Il viaggio testuale* 226-227). Il livello formale si offre come struttura simbolica del messaggio tematico-ideologico; messaggio in istanza sacralizzante.

### 3. Chiara e Francesco antimodelli della gerarchia medievale

In conformità al compito evocato per Chiara, il film della Cavani esibisce una rigorosa coerenza figurativa nell'intenzionalità di traslare la parola e l'esempio di una realtà tanto rivoluzionaria per la civiltà medievale (cfr. "Testamento," in *Fonti francescane* 1175). Creata la macrostruttura narrativa con la cornice atemporale della tenda, Cavani la immette nella ripartizione speculare della prima sequenza alla Porziuncola, dove i corpi di Francesco, Chiara e del Cristo crocifisso riproducono pittoricamente la connessione fra realtà segnica e realtà esistenziale: un *tableau* religioso ritualizzante un *iter* subito connesso al modello del reale della vita assisana e mercantile nel ricordo del primo incontro. L'inquadratura, da angolatura alta, ridimensiona l'allegoria del cavaliere spirituale con toni da letteratura cortese del Francesco giullare. La coincidenza fra le strutture sociali e le strutture del potere, che a livello di drammatizzazione culmina nel processo intentato da Pietro Bernardone al figlio, illumina la friabilità interna al sistema gerarchico di una cultura in fase di trasformazione. L'esperimento di Francesco mette in totale crisi l'ideologia del sistema feudale, aprendo a un percorso di riclassificazione dello *status*: è la destituzione della gerarchizzazione verticale del modello medievale.

*Francesco* si costruisce a quadri che illustrano *exempla* in *flash-back* dall'anno della morte del protagonista (1226) all'incontro con Chiara (1211), alla tonsura alla Porziuncola (1212), alla testimonianza finale delle stimmate (1224), un segreto da lei sola custodito. Chiara e Francesco — i cui ruoli sono affidati a Mickey Rourke e a Helena Bonham Carter — non si oppongono di fatto alle *auctoritates* del loro tempo, ma vi aderiscono con una formula nuova per evolverle; una trasgressione che rappresenta la *fractura* epistemologica che segna la nascita del mondo moderno. Nel film, sono presenti tutte le codificazioni di

<sup>11</sup> Sulla distinzione tra esperienza mistica e esperienza profetica si veda Pozzi, "L'alfabeto delle sante" 27-29. Nel "Testamento" non si trascurava di registrare una profezia fatta da Francesco sulla fondazione dell'ordine delle Donne povere: "Venite ed aiutatemmi in quest'opera del monastero di San Damiano, perché fra poco verranno ad abitarlo delle donne, e per la fama e santità della loro vita si renderà gloria al Padre nostro celeste in tutta la sua santa Chiesa" (*Fonti francescane* 1176).

ascendenza medievale legate al *verbum* e all'*exemplum*, con una predilezione che raggiunge effetti iconici notevoli nelle corrispondenze clariane. L'esperimento del nuovo si rappresenta, infatti, secondo le tappe degli incontri tra la nobile Chiara e il figlio del mercante: dal primo incontro nella bottega di Pietro Bernardone ove Chiara si appresta a comprare un anello (prima allusione testuale a una mistica nunziale), all'episodio del mendicante durante il quale si instaura il ruolo-guida di Chiara (Francesco ne imita l'atto caritatevole), alla prima *edificatio* clariana dell'immagine del Cristo in San Damiano, il cui *gestus* Francesco emulerà al suo ritorno dalle fallite imprese cavalleresche. La interdipendenza tra i due personaggi è strettissima ai livelli di azione.

Le premesse stilistiche delle composizioni sceniche si riassumono in una dinamica dei *close-up* (volti, mani, piedi, ecc.) e delle relazioni spaziali del *décor*. Ripreso da una predominante angolatura frontale a campo medio, il quadro introduce la figura umana entro un rigoroso e stabile sfondo. Solide forme, quali porte, archi, strutture murarie verticali, diventano privilegiate. Una efficace operazione pittorica regola la geometria delle composizioni, mentre la teatralità dell'immagine si disloca nelle qualità emotive del volto, il *locus* diegetico del film. La macchina da presa assume l'occhio-obiettivo a segno narrativo. La dialettica delle riprese articola nel volto la sua massima ontologia visiva: ne sono assi portanti la scena di Francesco e del Cristo a San Damiano, la cui *repetitio* nei *flash-back* intensifica le prove iniziatiche del santo, e le inquadrature degli occhi di Chiara, di cui l'ultima, che chiude il film, trasmette tutto il simbolismo della visione come continua fonte di energia luminosa.

Da una valutazione tematica, i quadri possono definirsi delle note filosofiche che illustrano un unico concetto: la *paupertas* in quanto virtù evangelica e *principium* ontologico, la cui *essentia* si individua nei caratteri universali impressi ad emulazione di un Ente al tempo stesso superiore e partecipe alle vicissitudini della contingenza: il Cristo secondo le connotazioni archetipiche di *Anthropos*. Questa umanità è centrale alla concezione francescana della Cavani che, astraendo Chiara dalla tradizione apologetica, ne fa un personaggio in cui si può ritrovare la bellezza dell'Uomo che attualizza se stesso:

Francesco e Chiara sono due creativi che hanno lo stesso progetto: la ricerca del contatto con Dio per una loro rinascita in uomini nuovi come promesso dal Vangelo, un processo creativo che prevede alla base una genuina libertà e sincerità e il dispendio di tutte le energie conoscitive ed affettive per quel progetto. È come se essi fossero partiti da una riflessione su Genesi 1,27: "E Dio creò l'uomo ad immagine sua; ad immagine di Dio lo creò; maschio e femmina li creò".

(Cavani, "Donna e libertà d'espressione" 124)

Chiara vive una concreta esperienza individuale. Nel film si elimina l'immagine miracolosa e leggendaria della santa per una trasposizione che ne valorizza un intenso processo di espansione della coscienza: "Ero caritatevole

perché ero stata educata a esserlo? Compivo gesti usuali, non spontanei? Chi ero? Cosa volevo?” (Cavani-Mazzoni, *Francesco* 25). Il suo rifiuto della *proprietas*, come base precludente la *caritas*, è nel senso cristiano di amore per il prossimo, che ella attua come sentimento di partecipazione alla infelicità altrui: è la *pietas* del Cristo. Attraverso il Cristo-*Anthropos* si può apprendere il significato reale dell'esistenza e aspirare alla realizzazione della totalità. Come lo storico Figlio dell'Uomo, il modello di Francesco simboleggia e l'interiorità e l'aspetto empirico dell'umanità.<sup>12</sup> L'avventura esistenziale di Chiara tende quindi all'integrazione delle componenti psichiche consce e inconscie per accedere al divino.

Un secondo aspetto del film illustra le manifestazioni dei seguaci di Francesco da una prospettiva esistenziale che spazia dalla necessità pastorale della predicazione (Rufino nel Duomo di Assisi) all'assistenza ai *pauperes* e ai lebbrosi, di cui Chiara è modello configurante.<sup>13</sup> Il punto di vista è affidato alle narrazioni di Bernardo di Quintavalle, Rufino, Leone, Angelo e Egidio. Nella scena del processo (ricostruito da chi ne deteneva allora diretta testimonianza delle legalità gerarchiche, il notaio Bernardo), si attua la rispondenza formale di *status* e *locus*, implicita nella struttura stessa del rito pubblico di espulsione:<sup>14</sup> le funzioni segniche della piazza cittadina, referente storico e sociale legato all'economia del denaro (la *res* in potere dell'uomo), e il *locus*, la funzionalità esemplare di una comunità di uomini in movimento antitetico con la staticità inerente al modello gerarchico del tempo.

Questo nuovo modello semiotico del mondo rimanda alla realtà segnica del Cristo della Porziuncola, quando l'annullamento della personalità individuale di Chiara e Francesco nell'astrazione ieratica delle forme dei corpi a terra — composti a immagine speculare riflessa — sottende il superamento della fisicità dell'ambiente. Con un ritorno circolare all'inizio, Liliana Cavani illustra come dall'astratto si deduca la simbologia della realtà esistenziale di Chiara. In lei, la centralità della figura del Cristo, icona reale della attuabilità dell'esperienza dell'amore perfetto, informa ogni tematica relativa alla mistica al femminile: “Pensai . . . pensai che l'amore aveva reso il suo corpo identico al corpo

<sup>12</sup> Da qui l'identificazione col *Christus Patiens* nella celebrazione del linguaggio del corpo, a cui ricorre la donna mistica medievale per figurare la propria esperienza. Cfr. Covi, “Il femminile nel linguaggio morale di Chiara d'Assisi,” in *Chiara. Francescanesimo al femminile* 116-119; Robertson, “The Corporeality of Female Sanctity in *The Life of Saint Margaret*” 268-270. Per l'aspetto archetipale del Cristo *Anthropos* si veda Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East* 57; *Civilization in Transition* 397.

<sup>13</sup> Si noti che all'inizio del Duecento la povertà era considerata uno *status* disonorabile. I poveri, in particolare nelle sembianze dei lebbrosi, erano identificati con l'immorale. Per il rapporto con le donne cfr. Jo Ann McNamara, “The Need to Give: Suffering and Female Sanctity in the Middle Ages,” in *Image of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* 208 e sg.

<sup>14</sup> Per questo accostamento di *locus* e *status* si rimanda a Corti 223-224.



dell'amato. Mi chiesi se sarei mai riuscita ad amare così tanto" (Cavani-Mazzoni, *Francesco* 123). Come sentimento assoluto, l'amore comprende in sé tutto il suo significato: *caritas, paupertas* e *oboedientia*, le virtù della spiritualità clariana, sono il poetico esercizio della perfezione.<sup>15</sup> Cristo come *Logos* è il vero *principium individuationis*, la cui essenza si traduce nel simbolo della Croce.<sup>16</sup> Il *pensiero*, il discorrere interiore esternato dalle voci mentali dei narratori, e la *parola*, che si concreta nel comportamento fattuale di Chiara, riassumono la dottrina enunciata nel prologo del Vangelo Secondo Giovanni (la fede delle prime generazioni cristiane). Per la figlia di Favarone di Offreduccio, l'atto è il momento essenziale dell'attività dello spirito. Le immagini iconografiche attinenti al grande tema della "follia della Croce" — come Michel Foucault ha chiamato lo "scandalo" del Cristo — sono ricche di implicazioni.<sup>17</sup> Quella di San Damiano ha lo sguardo fisso, piatto, tipico delle raffigurazioni italiane del tardo XII secolo, che pongono l'enfasi sulle qualità divine di un Cristo che sembra vivo nella gestualità (occhi aperti, corpo retto) e superiore all'agonia della Croce: è il *Christus Triumphans*; l'altra, la croce bizantina del Duomo di Assisi, ritrae la sofferenza dell'*Anthropos* cosmico, il *Christus Patiens*, il cui capo inclinato, gli occhi chiusi, e il costato sanguinante esemplificano la stilizzazione della morte e del sacrificio. I due crocifissi incorporano la spiritualità e la fisicità dell'*exemplum* posti a confronto. Si può osservare che nel recente *Francesco* le due immagini (distinte e esemplari nel film del '66) perdono gradualmente il rapporto dialettico nella versione dell'icona bizantina che ha tutti i segni della condizione umana e porta le stimmate della miseria della morte. Solo l'immagine cristocentrica, a cui ritorna la psico-realtà di Chiara e di Francesco, riscatta nei valori di rifondazione antropologica e religiosa: Cristo diviene il punto più alto della saggezza umana (Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* 170). Francesco quale *Alter Adamus* è l'eroe fondatore; quale *Alter Christus*, ne ribadisce *in corpore* l'esemplarità di vita e di parola.

In linea con la tradizione orale-letteraria, la Cavani recupera immagini legate alla sfera del quotidiano e a livelli linguistici modulati sulla parlata colloquiale-popolare. La specularità fra l'esempio tracciato dalla vita del Cristo e la *praxis* in Chiara è di un marcato realismo sensoriale; la *fisicità* e l'*icasticità* della

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. "Lo specchio di perfezione" di Frate Leone, in *Santa Chiara d'Assisi*, a cura di G. Casoli, p. 104.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Jung, *Psychology and Religion* 264. Nel cristianesimo, il *principium individuationis* come fonte negativa (la natura umana e il peccato originale) è superato dal sacrificio del Cristo. Dello stesso autore, si veda *Alchemical Studies* 196.

<sup>17</sup> Nella figura del Cristo, Foucault vede colui che "ha voluto passare agli occhi di tutti per un folle, percorrendo così nella sua incarnazione, tutte le miserie dell'umano decadimento: la follia diviene così la forma ultima, l'ultimo grado del Dio fatto uomo, prima della realizzazione e della liberazione della Croce" (*Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* 171-172).

gestualità sfumano l'alone mistico-romantico del suo rapporto con Francesco. Se questi è il confuso che discende nei labirintici meandri di un sottosuolo che ha una dimensione onirica tra l'apocalittico e il demonico — ove l'oscuramento della coscienza ha una codificazione visiva in "fumo" "nebbia" "polvere" "vento" che sottendono la fotografia "sfocata" — Chiara illumina la via al centro archetipale, su cui la regista ritorna nella simmetria mandala di *Milarepa* (1974). Il ruolo di Chiara si compendia nelle immagini della "scala", del "cerchio", della "casa", della "fortezza", della "croce". Il mondo inorganico è rappresentato dalla *pietra*, emblema di incorruttibilità, permanenza e divinità.<sup>18</sup> Nell'*exemplum* di Chiara, si concreta l'impresa esistenziale e poetica dell'*agere* del nuovo uomo.

#### 4. La metafora del viaggio mistico

Nella loro relazione simbolica all'*imago* del Cristo, le lettere di Chiara ad Agnese di Praga sono testamento spirituale. Partendo da un'empirica segnalazione delle cose (il rifiuto di Agnese alle nozze con Federico II), Chiara cristallizza una visione cristocentrica del mondo spiegata dalla lirica della mistica nunziale:

Mentre avreste potuto più di ogni altra godere delle fastosità, degli onori e delle dignità mondane . . . avete preferito con tutta l'anima e con tutto il trasporto del cuore, abbracciare la santissima povertà e le privazioni del corpo, per donarvi ad uno Sposo di ancor più nobile origine. . . . Il suo amore vi farà casta, le sue carezze più pura, il possesso di Lui vi confermerà vergine. Poiché la sua potenza è più forte d'ogni altra, più larga è la sua generosità: la sua bellezza è più seducente, il suo amore più dolce ed ogni suo favore più fine. Ormai stretta nell'amplesso di Lui, Egli ha ornato il vostro petto di pietre preziose; alle vostre orecchie ha fissato inestimabili perle; e tutta vi ha rivestita di nuove e scintillanti gemme, come a primavera, e vi ha incoronata di *un diadema d'oro, inciso col simbolo della santità*.

("Lettera prima," in *Fonti francescane* 1190)

L'idea centrale è quella del Corpo di Cristo, la cui fusione nel rapporto d'amore perfetto consente alla natura umana di aspirare all'essenza della divinità. La parola, soffusa di un carismatico lirismo mistico, vocalizza il *corpus* di una esperienza personale. Accanto ai referenti d'apertura, che sottendono una storia dello *status* di fronte a una situazione sociale, esiste l'intenzione di pragmatizzare la distinzione fondamentale pronunciata nella scelta esistenziale della figlia del re di Boemia. Chiara enuncia una logica della comunicazione che si lega alla sua

<sup>18</sup> Per il simbolismo del centro, si veda Eliade, *Images and Symbols. Studies in Religious Symbolism* 41-56. Sull'analogia Cristo-lapis cfr. Jung, *Alchemical Studies* 95.

formazione spirituale coll'ordine dei frati minori, per cui la nobile Agnese diviene "sposa, madre e sorella" del Crocifisso povero, "madre e figlia, e sposa del Re".<sup>19</sup> Karl Uitti ha rilevato che, in maniera paradossale, il potere della mistica risiede nell'essenza storicamente rivoluzionaria della sua fedeltà conservatrice, nella sua immancabile assimilazione alla figura della sposa di Cristo: "I suoi privilegi — la sua reale legittimità — derivano dal suo stato indissolubile come promessa o sposa, dalla sua posizione esemplare di *fedeltà*" nella *copula sacra*.<sup>20</sup> Ogni lettera dell'epistolario clariano rappresenta il tema d'amore come messaggio centrale che interviene nella realtà sociale per modificarla. L'esperienza del perfetto amore è una via tutta concreta di costruzione di una figura autorevole, aperta al mondo. Se di gerarchia si parla per le lettere è come specifica conferma di un ordine sacro, segno del deiforme, il cui impianto speculare è il Dio-Re-Sposo dell'ordine gerarchico medievale. In questo senso, la mistica clariana rivolge un messaggio profondo alla società umana, attivo nelle contingenze della storicità:

E questa è la perfezione, per la quale il Re stesso ti unirà a sé nell'eterno talamo, dove siede glorioso su un trono di stelle, che tu, stimando cosa vile la grandezza di un regno terreno e sdegnando l'offerta di un connubio imperiale, per amore della santissima povertà, in spirito di profonda umiltà e di ardentissima carità, ricalchi con assoluta fedeltà *le orme* di Colui del quale hai meritato d'essere sposa.

("Lettera seconda," in *Fonti francescane* 1193-1194)

Il viaggio di Chiara, come quello di Francesco, è un percorso interiore di perfezione calato nell'umano. L'amore perfetto domanda l'abbraccio fraterno e materno, e in quest'ultimo giace il mistero della rigenerazione, la pienezza del divino in lei. La mediazione clariana non si esplica nella mera aderenza al modello francescano delle origini, bensì nella conseguente articolazione di un messaggio inclusivo degli uomini e nella propulsione a ridefinire la funzionalità segnica della perfezione. Nella "Regola" è significativo che Chiara si appelli *plantula Francisci*, ove il termine *planta* valida l'etimologia medievale di "fondamenta" (Roggen, *The Spirit of St. Clare* XIII). In rapporto all'androcentrismo del tempo, la caratteristica saliente di questo movimento è "proprio quella di uscire fuori dallo steccato che divide il maschile dal femminile".<sup>21</sup> Secondo una visione diacronica della realtà sociale, Chiara affronta

<sup>19</sup> "Lettera seconda" e "Lettera quarta", in *Fonti francescane* 1190; 1200. Per l'accostamento dei termini "sponsa" e "regina" con il Cristo-specchio si veda Dozzi, "Chiara e lo specchio," in *Chiara. Francescanesimo al femminile* 295 e seg.

<sup>20</sup> "Women Saints, the Vernacular, and History," in Blumenfeld-Kosinski e Szell, *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* 249.

<sup>21</sup> "Liliana parla di Chiara," *Laurentianum* 405. "Francesco è arrivato a questa sua invidiabile maturità umana attraverso il suo rapporto con Dio, certo, ma anche attraverso il suo rapporto con



un suo proprio discorso creativo. Significativo è stato il percorso all'interno dell'*iter* tracciato da Francesco. Dalla specola di una tipologia culturale ageografica, Liliana Cavani ha sviluppato l'idea di una relazione entro le strutture ad essa preesistenti. L'incontro tra gli schemi culturali medievali e le trasgressioni di Chiara e Francesco si figurano in un moderno processo di attiva trasformazione.

Simbolo dell'osmosi tra storico e spirituale, tra laico e religioso, *Francesco* è un film del futuro, come i suoni elettronici della colonna sonora di Vangelis anticipano dalla sequenza dei titoli. Cinematograficamente corposo e immaginoso, si pone come emblema della speranza. La Cavani crea un continuo effetto d'approfondimento di campo coll'illuminare il *background* a fasci di luce più intensa, sicché l'occhio dello spettatore viene sedotto da questa spirale di luce. La polarizzazione delle immagini intorno all'antitesi primaria luce-tenebra fornisce l'assioma del rito di passaggio, di cui il personaggio di Chiara è vettore: è la nostalgia della verticalità pura. Se per mistica intendiamo il processo di illuminazione spirituale che si realizza attraverso la pratica non speculativa della *caritas*, Chiara compendia tutta l'esperienza dell'ineffabile metamorfosi dell'essere; e in questi termini, attualizza una visione di significato cosmico.

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le donne. . . . Quelli che amano davvero le donne sono riconoscibili, perché sono più ricchi, perché è come se avessero un emisfero in più" ("Liliana parla di Chiara," *Laurentianum* 408). In tal senso, Raurell parla di Francesco come dell'uomo "non-animoso": "Il movimento di Chiara e Francesco disegna la donna come una persona completa, disegna un mondo in cui le donne siano visibili ed udibili" ("Verso il femminile delle fonti francescane," in Covi e Dozzi, *Chiara. Francescanesimo al femminile* 14).

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## **Italian Women Mystics: A Bibliographical Essay**

**T**he field of Christian women's mysticism has witnessed a renewed popularity in recent years: in addition to a long-standing interest on the part of scholars of religion and spirituality (whose studies have recently been fueled by an increasing tendency towards ecumenism), the writings of women mystics have for some time now been attracting the curious gaze of cultural historians, linguists, philosophers and, above all, that of feminists and psychoanalysts. The following bibliography makes no pretense at being complete; rather, it is aimed at directing the reader's attention to many of the major, as well as some of the not-so-major publications in the field, with the hope of helping somewhat in the maze of books and articles that have appeared on this increasingly popular subject. The divisions by topics in the first part of the essay are somewhat arbitrary, since most of the works cited deal with much more than the topic under which they have been categorized. Nonetheless, the categories are intended to make research a little less cumbersome. It will soon be clear to the reader that, although the focus of the present bibliography is on the mystics of Italy, references are not limited to works on Italian women mystics alone. This choice is prompted by the consideration that drawing neat geographical lines in this context would be at best misleading, as is obvious not only from the cross-cultural nature of the critical works cited, but also and especially because of the intrinsically international character of the mystical experience.

While the first part of this article is an essay meant as a general introduction to the field of Italian women's mysticism, followed by a list of works cited, the second part consists of a bibliography divided by author and ordered chronologically. Whenever possible, I have referred to a printed version of each author's works. When a printed version does not exist, I have relied on the bibliographical indications given by Giovanni Pozzi and Claudio Leonardi in their excellent volume *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*. The names of the best-known Italian women mystics (arranged chronologically), are followed by a list of primary and secondary sources. Once again, this essay cannot provide a complete bibliography; rather, it is intended to offer several points of departure for further

research. In addition to references accumulated over the past few years in my study of women's mysticism, I have consulted several sources. First of all, in their *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* Pozzi and Leonardi offer individual bibliographies; their book also contains valuable introductions to many mystics, as well as a brief selection from their writings. Although unfortunately still incomplete, the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* provides extensive bibliographies for those authors it includes. I have also consulted the later volumes of the *International Medieval Bibliography* (1979-1993), *Religion Index* (1979-1994), and *Alternative Press Index* (1988-1994), while my computer search includes the *Historical Abstracts*, the *MLA Bibliography*, and the *Worldcat-OCLC*.

## 1. Bibliographical Essay

### 1.1. Introductions to Women Mystics

The seminal volume for anyone interested in the study of Italian women mystics is the collection *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, mentioned above, edited by Giovanni Pozzi and Claudio Leonardi. The volume opens with two essays by the editors. The first of these, Pozzi's "L'alfabeto delle sante," is a valuable introduction to women's mysticism in the Italian context, focusing on the peculiarities of women's mystical discourse; the second introductory essay, Leonardi's "La santità delle donne," is a chronological overview of the history and the hagiography of Italian women mystics. In *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, the selections from each author's writings are preceded by a brief presentation of each mystic's life and works, and of the issues raised in her writings. At the end of the volume several bibliographies are included; the "bibliografia ragionata" is especially useful. It is divided according to the topics raised by mystical discourse in general — including the meanings and uses of the term "mysticism," the status of mystical discourse, its relation to religious, theological, and poetic discourse, to hagiography, the history of spirituality, and linguistics, semiotics, and rhetoric. No attempt is made in this bibliography, however, to address topics that are specific to women's mysticism.

Other introductions to women mystics include Emilie Zum Brunn's and Georgette Epiney-Burgard's *Femmes troubadours de Dieu*, and Valerie Lagorio's "The Medieval Continental Women Mystics: An Introduction." Lagorio's essay is divided geographically, with a section devoted to Italy and Sweden (focusing on Angela da Foligno and Caterina da Siena). Another book that includes introductions to some Italian women mystics (Chiara d'Assisi, Caterina da Siena, and Caterina da Genova) is Carol Lee Flinders' *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics*; the monographical essays of this book, as well as the introduction, contain feminist meditations (rich in biographical information) about the relevance of Christian women mystics for today's world

from a non-Catholic, yet loosely spiritual perspective.

A fascinating visual as well as verbal introduction to women mystics is Jean-Noël Vuarnet's *Extases féminines*, a provocative book which describes itself as an "essai sur la représentation de l'extase" (5) — limited, as the title implies, to the ecstasy of women. The book overflows with reproductions of paintings and sculptures of women's ecstasy, interspersed through a series of essays both on women's mysticism in general (the author claims that "la véritable mystique est fondamentalement femme," 7), and on specific women mystics in particular. Among the Italians, we find essays on Caterina da Siena, Caterina da Genova, Caterina de' Pazzi, and Angela da Foligno. Another iconographical essay, though of a quite different and more conventional nature, is *Sante e beate ombre tra il XIII e il XIV secolo. Chiara d'Assisi, Agnese d'Assisi, Margherita da Cortona, Angela da Foligno, Chiara da Montefalco, Margherita da Città di Castello. Mostra Iconografica*.

Texts on women mystics published in Italy also include the collections *Mistica e misticismo oggi*; *Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo nel secolo XIII*; *Il movimento religioso femminile in Umbria nei secoli XIII-XIV*; *Santa Chiara da Montefalco e il suo tempo*; and *Temi e problemi nella mistica femminile trecentesca*, the latter with essays on Margherita da Cortona and the iconography of visions. A very useful text for the study of Renaissance women mystics is Gabriella Zarri's *Le sante vive: Cultura e religiosità femminile nella prima età moderna*, which discusses both the early-modern model of women's sainthood and the political and social functions carried out by women mystics. Together with Lucetta Scaraffia, Zarri has also edited the marvelous and essential volume *Donne e fede: santità e vita religiosa in Italia*. Although not limited to mysticism, this book contains, among other things, valuable discussions of the topos of mystical marriage, the use of the epistolary genre by women spiritual writers, and women's mystical writings. Finally, in his introduction to the anthology *Sante e streghe: biografie e documenti dal XIV al XVII secolo*, Marcello Craveri outlines (albeit rather reductively) the blurred and fascinating boundary between the body language of saints and that of witches.

### *1.2. Definitions of Mysticism and Women's Mystical Discourse*

Discussions of women's mysticism can be found both in general texts on mysticism and in cultural or literary studies that, although not directly involved in the analysis of mystical discourse, are nevertheless fascinated by it. Among the former, we find classics such as Giorgio Petrocchi's *Ascesi e mistica trecentesca* and Massimo Petrocchi's *Storia della spiritualità italiana*, as well as more specialized studies. In *Il linguaggio dei mistici*, for example, Massimo Baldini discusses the oral or colloquial style of women mystics (prompted by women's illiteracy or semi-literacy as well as by their special affectivity) in a philosophical context, while in "Mystical Literature" Carl Keller examines the



varieties of literary genres employed by mystical authors. Examples of literary or cultural studies that touch on mystical discourse may be found in some of the works of Roland Barthes, such as *Le Plaisir du texte* and *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, in which the author (who admits his obsession with mystics) maintains that we must turn to mystic writings in order to find a successful formulation of the transgressive language of *jouissance*.

An excellent introduction to the problematic status of mystical language in general, with references to Angela da Foligno and the role of gender in the mystical experience, is Adelia Noferi's essay "Ripensare la mistica." Also, the work of Michel de Certeau deserves a special note in this context. Most important is his *La Fable mystique: XVIe-XVIIe siècle*, in which the author draws from the tools of such disciplines as psychoanalysis, semiotics, history, anthropology, and linguistics in order to read the writings of 16th- and 17th-century mystics. Indispensable for the newcomer to the field of mysticism, and also quite useful for the specialist, is de Certeau's article "Mystique" in the *Encyclopædia Universalis*. In these texts, a discussion of the peculiar situation of women in the field of mysticism is inevitable, since de Certeau's interest in the body and its languages punctuates many of this great scholar's arguments. An approach not unlike de Certeau's may be found in M. Bergamo's *La scienza dei santi. Studi sul misticismo del Seicento*.

An alternative theorization of mysticism is the objective of John Hoyles' essay "Beyond the Sex-Economy of Mysticism: Some Observations on the Communism of the Imagination with Reference to Winstanley and Traherne." In this essay, the author contrasts the opposing theses of mysticism as an orthodox religious experience and of mysticism as a sublimated sexual function; in so doing, he arrives at an alternative interpretation of mystical practice as relatively autonomous and yet analyzable with the tools of a materialist theory that avoids reductionism. Hoyles' argument is eminently applicable to the analysis of women mystics, who have traditionally been the target of medicalization. A sympathetic example of such a medicalization may be found in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where the author stresses the affinity between the neurotic and the mystical temperament without detracting from the validity of the spiritual experience.

Valuable introductions to various aspects of mysticism can also be found in the entries on mysticism of such encyclopedias as the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* ("Mystical phenomena," "Mysticism," and "Mysticism in literature"), the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* ("Mystique"), the *Enciclopedia filosofica* ("Mistica"), and the *Catholicisme hier aujourd'hui demain* ("Mystique"). Finally, J. Giles Milhaven's article "A Medieval Lesson on Bodily Knowing: Women's Experience and Men's Thought" sensitively discusses the analogies between the contemporary feminist focus on women's bodily epistemology and the similar emphasis that medieval women mystics placed on physical experience in their relationship with God.

### 1.3. *The Psychology of Mystical Experience*

More frequently than in the case of their male counterparts, it has been the fate of women mystics to be diagnosed as physically or, more often, mentally ill. This diagnosis reached its apex of popularity in the late nineteenth century, with the work of Jean-Martin Charcot (*Les Démoniaques dans l'art*) and Richard von Krafft-Ebing (*Psychopathia Sexualis. With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct. A Medico-Forensic Study*); it continued in our century with the more sympathetic *De l'Angoisse à l'extase: Études sur les croyances et les sentiments*, by Pierre Janet, and the ferociously antagonistic book by Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*.

The majority of the studies published in more recent times about the relationship of women mystics with madness and/or neurosis intend at least to complicate this otherwise facile relationship, if not to downright "acquit" the woman mystic. From the perspective of the psychoanalyst, we can find a theologically informed reading in Antoine Vergote's *Dette et désir*, which contains an especially valuable chapter on the possible distinction between "mystical enjoyment, displaced eroticism, and sublimated libido" (by Vergote, one can also consult *Religion, foi, incroyance*). Of interest are also some of the essays contained in the special issue of the *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* entitled *Résurgences et dérivées de la mystique*; Guy Rosolato's "Présente mystique," for example, is a careful examination of mystical discourse and its possible ties with psychoanalysis in terms of language, gender, knowledge, union, and *jouissance*.

Less technical but also written from a comparative viewpoint are Kenneth Wapnick's "Mysticism and Schizophrenia" and William Ober's "Margery Kempe: Hysteria and Mysticism Reconciled." A more general study, written by a theologian that analyzes Lacan's reading of Freud in relation to the mystic's reading of prophetic texts can be found in David Tracy's "Mystics, Prophets, Rhetorics: Religion and Psychoanalysis." Finally, the viewpoint of the social historian is represented in Roy Porter's "Mad Women," which, in examining the story of Margery Kempe, condemns the stigmatizing *post mortems* performed on her and other mystics like her and underlines the need for a contextualizing approach to some of the woman mystic's admittedly odd practices.

### 1.4. *Silence, the Ineffable, and Women's Self-representation*

The concept of the ineffable, or of the mystic's impossibility of communicating verbally her/his experience, is a major topos of mysticism. An excellent study of the role of ineffability in mystical literature is Paolo Valesio's "'O entenebrata luce ch'en me luce': la letteratura del silenzio;" Valesio's essay analyzes in an original way the topos of the ineffable as a poetic strategy employed by the writer in order to overcome the obstacle of silence, although he focuses exclusively on male authors. In what is probably the most notorious

psychoanalytic reading of mysticism, Jacques Lacan's "Dieu et la jouissance de l/a femme" has permanently associated the topos of the ineffable with the (self)-representation of the gendered subject. Lacan's thesis is in fact that women's pleasure is analogous to the mystic's pleasure and that they are both unrepresentable because they lie beyond the symbolic order of language — a thesis that has been contested, as I have done in my "On the (Un)Representability of Woman's Pleasure: Angela of Foligno and Jacques Lacan." Not all women mystics, however, revel in apophatic or negative mysticism, and indeed positive mysticism has been traditionally (if perhaps mystifyingly) gendered as female mysticism. An excellent discussion of this subject is Sarah Beckwith's "A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe," in which the author analyzes women's mysticism (exemplified by, but not limited to, Margery Kempe's) in relation to psychoanalytic, feminist, and historical texts.

### *1.5. Stigmata and the Language of the Body*

The association of women with nature and men with culture, by now a commonplace of feminist criticism, is reflected in the history of mysticism by the identification of woman with flesh and man with spirit. This dichotomy has been brilliantly discussed by Caroline Walker Bynum in her essay "' . . . And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages." Related to this double identification is the strikingly larger number of stigmatics among women than among men mystics. The topic of stigmata received an inordinate amount of attention at the end of the last century (see for example the classic monograph *Science et miracle: Louise Lateau ou la stigmatisée belge*, by Désiré-Magloire Bourneville), and indeed the most complete work on the subject remains Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre's *La Stigmatisation, l'extase divine et les miracles de Lourdes: réponse aux libres penseurs*. More recently, the subject has attracted some attention from diverse perspectives: cultural anthropology (Piero Camporesi, *La carne impassibile*), psychoanalysis (Michael P. Carroll, "Heaven-Sent Wounds: The Stigmata"), and more eclectic approaches such as Georges Didi-Huberman's "Un Sang d'images," Marco Margnelli's *Gente di Dio: storie vere di estasi, stigmati e miracoli nel ventesimo secolo*, and Ian Wilson's *The Bleeding Mind: An Investigation into the Mysterious Phenomenon of Stigmata*. What all of these studies have in common is a clear awareness of the predominance of stigmata among women mystics, and a consequent need to come to terms with the gendered nature of this phenomenon.

### *1.6. Food and the Mystical Experience of Women*

The study of mysticism in recent years has concerned itself at length with the relationship of the woman mystic with her body as a gendered entity — frequently, with the relationship between body and food and, even more often,



the closely related link between body and sexuality. Women mystics' attitude towards food and eating is the subject of two important studies published in the 1980s, namely Rudolph M. Bell's *Holy Anorexia* and Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. The former — dedicated to Italian saints exclusively — overtly concerns itself, though in a way that is by no means reductive, with the intersection of mystical and neurotic experience, comparing (*mutatis mutandis*) medieval as well as later Italian mystics' abstinence from food with the modern anorectic's. On the other hand, Bynum's book, more circumscribed in time (though not in space: Italian mystics figure prominently, but they are not the only objects of inquiry), takes a more frankly historical and historicizing approach to the issue as it surfaces in the lives and writings of medieval women mystics. Other relevant works by Bynum, who is certainly among the most interesting voices in the field of women's mysticism, include the books *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* and *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. In "'This Is My Body': Reflections on Abjection, Anorexia, and Medieval Women Mystics," Martha Reineke takes Bynum's research as a point of departure for theoretical reflections which draw from the work of Mary Douglas, Bryan Turner, Julia Kristeva, and René Girard.

### 1.7. *The Gendered Body and the Woman Mystic*

Other studies that discuss the woman mystic's relationship with her body and the representation of such a body by others include Don Christopher Nugent's "There Was a Feminine Mysticism" and, more importantly, Laurie Finke's "The Grotesque Mystical Body: Representing the Woman Writer," previously published as "Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision"; about this version Valerie Lagorio has written a "Response to Laurie Finke's 'Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision.'" Finke's is an original feminist approach, which employs Bakhtin's distinction between the "classical" and the "grotesque" body in order to examine medieval women mystics' understanding and representation of their own bodies.

Several French feminists have written about women mystics. Angela da Foligno, popularized in France thanks to Ernest Hello's translation of her *Libro*, is a name that often recurs in these writings. In a chapter of *Le Deuxième sexe* entitled "La mystique," for example, Simone de Beauvoir condemns mysticism as a form of women's subjection or a retreat from power and even, at times, from reality, as a practice always bordering on masochism and erotomania. Luce Irigaray in "La Mystérieuse," a chapter of her *Speculum de l'autre femme*, revels instead in the association between mysticism and hysteria (as her title suggests), celebrating mysticism as the place in Western history where women have spoken and acted in the most public way. An excellent critique of Irigaray's essay, which examines the French feminist's theories in relation to mystical practice —

through a reading of the texts of two medieval women mystics — can be found in Carol Slade's "Alterity in Union: The Mystical Experience of Angela of Foligno and Margery Kempe." Julia Kristeva, whose *Histoires d'amour* contains chapters on the "Song of Songs" and on the French mystic Jeanne Guyon, discusses an important aspect of mysticism in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*; the object of the book is the discussion and definition of "abjection" as that transgressive practice of defilement in which mystic speech is located and which Kristeva describes as being, for mystical Christianity, "la preuve ultime de l'humilité devant Dieu" (13). Two useful articles that discuss the contribution of feminist thought to the study of women's mysticism are Amy Hollywood's "Beauvoir, Irigaray, and the Mystical" and Grace Jantzen's "Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics."

Two interesting collections of essays on women mystics have appeared recently: *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, edited by Ulrike Wiethaus, and Elizabeth Petroff's *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism*. Neither is limited to Italian mystics, although each contains some essays of relevance. In the book edited by Wiethaus, Jo Ann McNamara ("The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy") considers the contribution of women's mystical revelations (Caterina da Siena's, for example) to the teachings of the Dominicans in their attempts at extirpating heresy; in the same collection, E. Ann Matter's "Interior Maps of an Eternal External: The Spiritual Rhetoric of Maria Domitilla Galluzzi d'Acqui" is an introduction to the little-known story of this stigmatic nun from Counter-Reformation Lombardy. The collection of essays by Elizabeth Petroff contains several chapters on Italian women saints (for example, one on the Rule of Chiara d'Assisi and others on the hagiography of medieval Italian women saints), as well as a concluding essay, which is very loosely informed by the concepts of *écriture féminine* and *jouissance*, on writing the gendered body in texts by Marguerite d'Oingt, Angela da Foligno and Umiltà da Faenza. By Petroff, one can also read *The Consolation of the Blessed: Women Saints in Medieval Tuscany* and the volume she edited, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*.

Finally, although it deals with an English and not an Italian mystic, Karma Lochrie's *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* constitutes invaluable reading in the study of the intersection of body and speech in the life and works of women mystics, through a critical method that, although it draws productively from the theories of feminism and cultural studies, is firmly anchored in the history of medieval piety. In this context, the introduction and the first two chapters of Lochrie's book, "The Body as Text and the Semiotics of Suffering" and "The Text as Body and Mystical Discourse," are especially interesting and broad in their scope, certainly not limited to the work of Margery Kempe; there are extended references, for example, to Chiara da Montefalco, Caterina da Siena, and Angela da Foligno.

### 1.8. *Women's Mysticism, Women's Literature*

Women's mystical experiences have also been examined in relation to the history of women's literature and to feminist theories about women's writing. An example of this type of analysis may be found in Mary Mason's essay on women's autobiography, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," devoted to Margery Kempe but offering insights into the writing enterprise of women mystics in general. Also of relevance is Danielle Régnier-Bohler's "Voix littéraires, voix mystiques." This essay is a feminist examination of the relationship European medieval women entertained with language in general as well as with literary language and religious language in particular, in both written and oral form. (The Italian mystics alluded to include Angela da Foligno, Caterina da Siena, and Caterina da Genova.) But the relationship of the woman mystic with literary language, although it constitutes the very thesis of the two essays I just referred to, is also evoked regularly in some of the other works cited above — for example, Finke's and Lochrie's. A more general study on the relationship between ecstasy, language, and literature, is William Barnstone's *The Poetics of Ecstasy: Varieties of Ekstasis from Sappho to Borges*.

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## **REVIEWS & NOTES**



## Vita segreta delle corti nel Rinascimento italiano<sup>1</sup>

**S**e io fossi un attore e questo un palcoscenico, potrei incominciare così il mio discorso sulla vita segreta delle corti rinascimentali: Volete proprio sapere in che consistono le conclamate virtù dei nostri governanti? È semplice: sono poco altro che i fantasmi delle loro e nostre passioni, a cui si sono dati nomi onesti per permettere loro di fare impunemente tutto quello che vogliono.

Dicendo così, e potrei continuare a lungo su questo tono, non farei che parafrasare le famose *Massime* pubblicate nel 1664 e 1665 da uno che della vita delle corti se ne intendeva, il grande moralista e epigrammista francese François de La Rochefoucauld.<sup>2</sup> Potrei continuare dicendo, come egli disse, che la moderazione non è altro che un travestimento dell'ambizione, anzi un basso stato di spirito che ne sostituisce uno elevato e eroico. Parimenti, l'umiltà non è altro che il travestimento dell'orgoglio, per renderlo accetto e farcene accettare le manifestazioni nascoste; la generosità e la clemenza sono pigrizia e calcolo di buon effetto, come la gratitudine è calcolo interessato per assicurare la continuazione della fiducia (e dei prestiti che ci occorrono, nella vita come nel commercio). Quello che mi interessa particolarmente è che l'elenco etico di La Rochefoucauld è, punto per punto, una precisa trascrizione in negativo delle virtù che tradizionalmente, a cominciare dal *De officiis* di Cicerone, gli educatori dei principi e dei cortigiani insegnarono a praticare per ottenere successo a corte — per estensione, nella vita politica.

Nella sua lunga esperienza secolare al centro del mondo occidentale l'Italia ha avuto occasione di osservare tutti gli aspetti della vita politica, compresi i più problematici e negativi. Non per nulla fu l'Italia a produrre un Machiavelli, che non intese affatto descrivere fenomeni di comportamento puramente italiano, ma agli osservatori stranieri, guidati da animosità per ragioni religiose, economiche

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<sup>1</sup> Quello che segue è il testo di una conferenza che tenni il 14 luglio 1994 come parte dei Giovedì Culturali sponsorizzati dall'Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana (Treccani) e dalla Società Terme a Montecatini Terme. Ho preferito conservare il tono discorsivo della conferenza.

<sup>2</sup> La Rochefoucauld, *Oeuvres complètes*, a c. di L. Martin-Chauffier (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 301 per la Massima No. 2, citata dall'edizione dell'Aja, 1664, *Sentences et maximes de morale*.



e morali, suonò come una descrizione delle peculiarità delle corti italiane.

Un certo grado di sospetto verso il governo è una logica conseguenza delle cose stesse in ogni dittatura, ma è anche un ingrediente essenziale per una democrazia sana. Per forza di cose gli Italiani hanno potuto sviluppare questo atteggiamento per molti secoli fino a farne un'arte raffinata, se non sempre molto efficace. Il detto, assai rivelatore, *piove, governo ladro* ne è solo una manifestazione più o meno umoristica in quanto lo applica paradossalmente ad un campo nel quale la responsabilità del governo è, fortunatamente, minima.

Sappiamo bene che la lotta per la libertà e la democrazia è una lotta continua, perché l'istinto di sopruso e di esercizio crudo della forza, cioè l'esercizio della volontà di potenza, è parte integrante e inalienabile della natura umana, parte della stessa base biologica del nostro esistere. Per nostra ulteriore edificazione e istruzione diamo dunque uno sguardo, seppur sommario, a come si svolgevano le cose nel Rinascimento, cioè nel periodo in cui si formarono i modi di vita che da lungo si considerano alla base del vivere moderno.

Ma prima di far questo può essere opportuno volgerci per un momento al problema preliminare di una critica che sembra naturale e logica riguardo alla superiorità o meno di un sistema o l'altro di governo e amministrazione. Sentiamo criticare la democrazia perché a volte ci esaspera con la sua inefficienza. La stessa critica si sente pure fare, d'altra parte, ai sistemi dittatoriali. In ambedue i casi ci può essere una logica interna che ovvia queste critiche. Pensiamo ad un caso estremo e radicale, che fu discusso su giornali e riviste in Germania (1966-67) a proposito del modo in cui si doveva valutare l'abbondanza di doppioni nelle strutture governative del Nazismo.<sup>3</sup> Era il governo nazista da ammirare per la sua pur criminale efficienza, tipica dei governi autoritari, o era esso un nuovo esempio dell'inefficienza della dittatura al di là di superficiali apparenze? Come si dovevano interpretare le verosimilmente rovinose e costose duplicazioni fra le fieramente rivali camicie brune delle SA (Sturm Abteilungen) e le camicie nere delle SS (Schutz Staffeln), fra le SS e la Wehrmacht, fra le varie industrie e l'impero industriale "privato" di Göring, fra quest'ultimo nelle sue attività di costruzioni di armamenti e quell'altro enorme

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<sup>3</sup> Il dibattito iniziò con una serie di articoli sul settimanale tedesco *Der Spiegel* da parte del redattore Heinz Höhne nel 1966-67, sotto il titolo "Der Orden unter den Totenkopf" (L'ordine all'insegna del teschio), e il noto sociologo Norbert Elias trattò dell'argomento nel suo *Die höfische Gesellschaft* (1969; Darmstadt e Neuwied: Luchterhand, 4a ed. 1979); ed. inglese *The Court Society*, trad. di Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: B. Blackwell; New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), Appendice A, "On the notion that there can be a state without structural conflicts", pp. 276-283 dell'ed. inglese. Elias mise a confronto la tradizionale reazione di storici quali Hans Mommsen, che, a suo parere, ci impediscono di comprendere gli avvenimenti perché ignorano le necessarie tensioni strutturali in ogni tipo di società, compreso il despotismo più monolitico. Sul sistema politico prussiano vedi Robert M. Berdahl, *The Politics of the Prussian Nobility: The Development of a Conservative Ideology, 1740-1848* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

progetto di Himmler di costruire un impero industriale per armamenti all'interno delle sue SS (progetto da cui, nonostante enormi spese, non uscì mai un singolo fucile)?

Secondo il sociologo Norbert Elias, le contraddizioni del governo del Terzo Reich vanno interpretate non come segno di disorganizzazione e inefficiente guida al centro e all'alto, ma come la logica vera e propria del governo dittatoriale, che può riuscire solo a costo di gravi sprechi. Hitler tenne i suoi agenti e le loro coorti sotto controllo solo aizzandoli gli uni contro gli altri. Ma egli non aveva propriamente inventato questo sistema, lo aveva in parte ereditato dalla tradizione amministrativa della monarchia autoritaria prussiana con la sua corte aristocratica. In altre parole, era un sistema legato tipicamente **alla vita delle corti** di ogni tempo. Come dimostrano brillantemente, fra l'altro, i *Mémoires* di La Rochefoucault e quelli ancora più famosi del Cardinale di Retz, il Duca di Saint-Simon, e altri alti personaggi delle corti di Parigi e Versailles, Luigi XIV stabilì e mantenne il suo potere assoluto sulla nobiltà e la borghesia dell'alta burocrazia (le due nobiltà di spada e di toga, gli aristocratici già feudali e gli avvocati dei vari Parlamenti centrale e regionali) dividendoli in gruppi e giocando un gruppo contro l'altro, al fine di impedire che la loro opposizione diventasse un fronte comune. Ognuno al suo tempo e nella sua situazione, questi gruppi contrastanti rappresentavano reali interessi di categoria, tutti a rischio nel gioco di forze e di privilegi.

Parimenti, all'interno di una democrazia o di qualsiasi forma di governo rappresentativo l'apparente disordine nella lotta fra gruppi di potere e interessi, tutti tesi ad esercitare influenza sugli organi governativi (il famigerato "lobbying" di Washington e i "PAC" o Political Action Committees delle campagne elettorali americane) rappresentano il gioco legale e relativamente aperto delle forze reali della nazione, con procedimenti regolati dalle leggi, dalle elezioni pubbliche e da riconosciuta organizzazione in partiti e istituzioni rappresentative. Il pubblico tedesco, non preparato per la democrazia, si sentì a disagio di fronte al visibile spettacolo di disordine e disunione fra i partiti della Repubblica di Weimar, e Hitler ebbe buon gioco a convincerlo che si trattava di un cattivo sistema, da sostituire con un sistema, il suo, assai più efficiente (in superficie). Hitler sfruttò abilmente e cinicamente questa opportunità psicologica di distruggere la Repubblica di Weimar approfittando dell'immaturità politica del suo pubblico, e poi spostò le tensioni fra i gruppi sociali all'interno della sua corte intima, dove poteva tenerli d'occhio ma lontani dall'occhio del pubblico, giuocandoli, sempre a suo vantaggio, l'uno contro l'altro. I tedeschi non erano abituati allo spettacolo aperto dei contrastanti giuochi di forze e interessi. Anche se quei contrasti non erano affatto nuovi, erano sempre stati nascosti dietro le cortine artificiali della pompa di corte.

Il repubblicano Machiavelli fu il primo a comprendere che l'apparente disunione delle forze sociali della repubblica romana era un segno non già di debolezza ma di vitalità e energia, dimostrate dalla durabilità del sistema rispetto

alla profonda fragilità di monarchie e dittature — e per lui la resistenza al tempo era il vero banco di prova della relativa eccellenza di un sistema politico (si veda, ad esempio, *Discorsi I* ii-iv). Fu anche Machiavelli a capire, come dimostrò chiaramente nel discutere la dittatura romana (vedi, ad esempio, *Discorsi I* xxxiv), che quello che conta non è la quantità di potere ma la differenza fra potere regolato e potere insindacabile di fronte al popolo. Il dittatore romano era eletto legalmente per un periodo fisso, ed era responsabile di fronte al popolo al termine della carica.

Dopo questa digressione, che spero utile a delineare l'orizzonte di ogni discorso sul comportamento di personaggi in posizione di potere, come pure a collegare il nostro discorso con la storia del comportamento interno alle corti signorili, possiamo finalmente rivolgerci più specificamente al periodo del Rinascimento. Quando, in un'allocuzione datata al 25 novembre del 1516, Lodovico Alamanni volle dar consigli di buon cortigiano al Medici regnante (Lorenzo Duca di Urbino), gli suggerì di corrompere i più eminenti cittadini, i *leaders* della resistenza repubblicana, dando loro onori cavallereschi per farne dei cortigiani e tagliarli fuori dalla cerchia morale, psicologica e sociale dei partigiani della libertà e da ogni comunione di interessi con i governati. Una volta che gli elementi guida della cittadinanza fossero stati convertiti ad una vita di servi del nuovo principe, quindi legati al suo stesso destino, non avrebbero mai più potuto aspirare al favore popolare come campioni del comune interesse dei cittadini: "renuntiaranno alla repubblica et faranno professione all'ordine suo e mai più poi potranno pretendere al grado civile o alla benivolenza del populo".<sup>4</sup> È appunto questo che Cosimo I de' Medici riuscì a compiere nel 1562 con la creazione dell'Ordine cavalleresco di Santo Stefano, la cui stretta insistenza su ufficiali legami con la nobiltà (una nobiltà strettamente di corte, sorvegliabile e controllabile) era fra le più specifiche nell'Europa del tempo.<sup>5</sup>

Questo graduale processo di adattamento e corruzione si accompagnò alla nuova ondata di leggi suntuarie che sigillò la cristallizzazione della nuova classe nobiliare e la sua separazione dai cittadini comuni. Gli anni 1560 videro una legittimizzazione formale della nobiltà come entità ufficialmente identificabile e

<sup>4</sup> Adriano Prosperi, "Libri sulla corte ed esperienze curiali nel primo '500 italiano", in *La Corte e Il Cortegiano. 2: Un modello europeo*, a c. di A. Prosperi. Centro Studi "Europa delle Corti". Biblioteca del Cinquecento 9 (Roma: Bulzoni, 1980): 69-81, specialmente 83 e seg.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. A. Scaglione, *Knights at Court: Courtliness, Chivalry, and Courtesy from Ottonian Germany to the Italian Renaissance* (Berkeley-Cambridge: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 247, 284. Anche Claudio Donati, *L'idea di nobiltà in Italia: secoli XIV-XVIII* (Bari: Laterza, 1988), pp. 130 e seg. L'intero testo del "discorso" dell'Alamanni, dedicato "al Cap.no nostro Mag.co Lorenzo de Medici Duca di Urbino", si legge in Rudolf von Albertini, *Das florentinische Staatsbewusstsein im Übergang von der Republik zum Prinzipat* (Bern: Francke, 1955), pp. 362-371: v. specialmente pp. 370 e seg., o l'ed. it. *Firenze dalla repubblica al principato. Storia e coscienza politica* (Torino: Einaudi, 1970), p. 383.



fisicamente separata attraverso numerosi decreti-legge che istituzionalizzarono gli specifici ordini sociali e perfino prescissero il modo di andare vestiti in pubblico allo scopo di ulteriore, chiaramente visibile identificazione.<sup>6</sup>

I membri dell'Ordine di Santo Stefano dovevano diventare la nuova classe dirigente di Firenze e Toscana, derivata dalla volontà personale del duca e dipendente dal suo arbitrio. Solo famiglie di detentori di uffici pubblici e membri della nuova nobiltà, non i membri della vecchia nobiltà, erano esenti dalle restrizioni imposte dalle nuove leggi suntuarie dello stesso anno, che intendevano regolare il vestire e il "consumo cospicuo".<sup>7</sup> Tutti gli altri stati italiani avevano o avrebbero presto avuto simili provvedimenti pubblici.

Il volume *L'origine de' cavalieri* di Francesco Sansovino (1566), opportunamente dedicato a Cosimo I, era un coraggioso tentativo di mettere in ordine la crescente moltitudine di precetti che regolavano gli ordini religiosi di cavalleria, a cominciare dagli Ospedalieri di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme, che erano diventati i Cavalieri di Malta, fino all'Ordine di Santo Stefano di Cosimo I. I regolamenti del 1599 per l'Ordine di Malta erano particolarmente rigorosi, sanzionando la volontà di rafforzare la "serrata" delle nuove aristocrazie. I nuovi postulanti italiani dovevano dimostrare 200 anni di nobiltà, con nessuna partecipazione ad attività mercantili o agricole o a mestieri professionali, compresa l'arte notarile, per un periodo di quattro generazioni, e senza aver mai tenuto ufficio pubblico del tipo che era anche accessibile ai non nobili. Eccezioni a tali regole, che erano singolarmente estranee alla realtà sociale italiana del passato recente, erano ammesse per quattro sole città, cioè: Genova, Firenze, Siena e Lucca. Per quanto le restrizioni si applicassero a tutti i membri, si tentò di renderle strettamente compellenti specialmente per i gradi più alti della cavalleria, a cominciare con il cavaliere vero e proprio, con una certa indulgenza per i gradi più bassi di cappellano e sergente.<sup>8</sup>

Tutto questo non è che un aspetto radicale della separazione fra governanti e governati che è tipica del despotismo assolutistico, ma manifestazioni meno di punta di tale arroganza del potere sono visibili in qualsiasi amministrazione o governo, anche il più democratico e liberale, e questo stato di cose, o questo aspetto inalienabile della natura umana, è ciò che giustifica il bisogno di continuo controllo, quello che in inglese si chiama *checks and balances* come principio di buon governo e di atteggiamento pubblico verso il processo

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<sup>6</sup> "Mulieres vero popularium portare solent caputia ex panno laneo, et ista est notoria et manifesta differentia, . . . eo quia habitus demonstrat qualitatem et dignitatem personae deferentis." Cassanaeus [Barthélemy de Chasseneux (+ 1541), presidente del *parlement* di Aix-en-Provence], *Catalogus gloriae mundi* (1529; Venetiis: Vincentius Valgrisius, 1559, 1569), edizione Valgrisius 1559 cc. 159v-171r., citata da Claudio Donati, *L'idea di nobiltà in Italia* (1988), p. 114.

<sup>7</sup> Donati (1988), pp. 130-131 sul decreto di Cosimo I.

<sup>8</sup> Donati (1988), cap. 7: "Le 'prove di nobiltà' dei cavalieri italiani dell'Ordine di Malta (1555-1612)", pp. 247-265.

governativo. Nel Rinascimento gli osservatori italiani dal Machiavelli al Guicciardini, al Botero, al Guazzo, al Boccalini misero il dito sulla profonda ambiguità del comportamento politico, erigendo a dottrina la loro osservazione della frequenza, che poteva sembrare un bisogno innato, di doppiezza, insincerità e dissimulazione. Quest'ultima diventò perfino un termine tecnico usato in titoli di opere che studiavano appunto questo atteggiamento — che, a seconda dei punti di vista, poteva sembrare un vizio o una virtù. Machiavelli consiglia al principe che “paia, a vederlo e udirlo, tutto pietà, tutto fede, tutto integrità, tutto umanità, tutto religione”, perché “gli uomini, in universali, iudicano più agli occhi che alle mani” (*Il Principe* xviii). Aldilà del tono così nuovo e radicale, senti qui l'eco precisa di una etica cortigiana che nel processo di trasmissione e, per dirla con Stephen Greenblatt, di “negoiazione” dei codici di comportamento, aveva assegnato una valenza più sottile, ambivalente e perfino estetizzante ai tradizionali valori stoico/ciceroniani e cristiani.

Si trattava di nascondere e nascondersi, in un processo che poteva dar nuova vita a un tema letterario che risale al folklore, quello della magia, per cui certe pozioni o oggetti, come gli anelli, potevano servire a scopi precisi di rendere invisibili. Il Boiardo fu autore di una invenzione squisitamente italiana, l'anello fatato che era per Angelica cosa così preziosa, e sarebbe stratagemma assai opportuno per certi indiziati moderni che non vedrebbero l'ora di poter rendersi invisibili o introvabili al poliziotto e al giudice.<sup>9</sup>

È stato dimostrato che il codice di comportamento del cortigiano medievale e rinascimentale discende direttamente dal già menzionato *De officiis* di Cicerone, un manuale scritto per suo figlio futuro impiegato governativo, diremmo oggi, che presentava un codice di comportamento basato sull'etica delle virtù cardinali, fra cui la *temperantia* corrispondeva alla *moderatio* e *mensura* (ma anche la *prudentia* confluisce in parte nelle stesse). La prudenza si risolve parimenti in *discretio* ‘discrezione’ (anche in Guicciardini), di cui la tanto ammirata *sprezzatura* di Castiglione è una sorta di erede. La prudenza anche diventa cautela e reticenza (già virtù fondamentale del cortigiano e alto prelato alle corti imperiali e ecclesiastiche del Medioevo), e ambedue si ritrovano in forma nuova e acutizzata nel clima particolarmente servile del Rinascimento inoltrato.

La definizione del Rinascimento che Jacob Burckhardt dette nel 1860 era

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<sup>9</sup> L'anello di Angelica è rimasto vivo nella letteratura, e darò qui un esempio singolare e eloquente della forza dell'immaginazione letteraria. David Lodge, uno dei narratori più brillanti della letteratura corrente, nel suo assai fortunato *Small World* (Piccolo Mondo) presenta un esilarante personaggio il cui comportamento deriva in modo singolare dall'anello magico di Angelica, anche se l'autore non aveva ancora veramente letto l'*Orlando Furioso*. Mi confessò lui stesso, quando glielo chiesi nel 1987, che l'idea di una attraente giovane donna che misteriosamente sparisce dalla vista ogni volta che un suo innamorato ha la buona ventura di arrivarle abbastanza vicino, gli venne dall'aver letto parti della nuova traduzione del *Furioso* che Barbara Reynolds gli aveva mandato in omaggio a Birmingham.

eminentemente politica, e in questo senso Hans Baron è stato il suo erede più fedele.<sup>10</sup> Ma Baron introdusse un importante spostamento di accento. Il grande storico di Basilea aveva visto nello stato un'opera d'arte del nuovo *leader* individuale, l'uomo moderno che governava senza pregiudizi o preconetti morali e religiosi, allo scopo puramente umano di erigere una splendida macchina di potere. Si trattava di un palcoscenico per le risplendenti virtù dell'uomo nuovo, eroe di una alta cultura di arti figurative, scienza urbanistica, letteratura, e forme stupende di organizzazione sociale. Nelle sue pessimistiche previsioni sul futuro di una civiltà occidentale che stava perdendo le conquiste del Rinascimento, il Burckhardt, come più tardi, a suo modo, Oswald Spengler, esprimeva la sua nostalgia per una cultura che aveva creato le condizioni per un libero giuoco delle qualità dell'individuo forte. Egli vedeva in Firenze una nuova Atene e una nuova Roma repubblicana, libere città i cui ideali erano stati scartati dal moderno stato nazionale, destinato a sua volta ad essere sovvertito dalle nuove masse popolari emancipate, pronte ad imporre una cultura di massa basata su valori volgari, adulterati e prostituiti. Per il cittadino del libero comune di Basilea, come si sentiva Burckhardt, la democrazia avrebbe portato alla morte della civiltà.<sup>11</sup>

Quando, però, nel 1955 il Baron pose le vere radici dell'Umanesimo del Rinascimento nello spirito popolare fiorentino di resistenza a Milano, egli ribaltò al primo piano proprio quel sentimento di liberalismo democratico che Burckhardt profondamente disprezzava.<sup>12</sup> Questa prospettiva era per Baron di piena rilevanza per i nostri bisogni contemporanei: come Ernst Robert Curtius avrebbe trovato nella tradizione retorica classica le fonti di quella alta civiltà che la barbarie nazista minava alle basi, così il Baron stabiliva una diretta analogia fra il Rinascimento come lotta vittoriosa della Firenze repubblicana-democratica-liberale contro la despótica Milano dei Visconti da un lato e, dall'altro lato, la lotta fra la democrazia moderna e il Nazismo. Tornerò al Baron, ma voglio prima ricordare altri importanti spostamenti nella prospettiva storiografica che ebbero

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<sup>10</sup> È con buona ragione che Robert Klein accomunò i due storici nella interpretazione politica del Rinascimento: v. Klein, *La forme et l'intelligible: écrits sur la Renaissance et l'art moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 211. Ed. inglese *Form and Meaning: Essays on the Renaissance and Modern Art*, trad. di Madeline Jay e L. Wieseltier (New York: Viking Press, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (Bern: Hallwag, 1947); ed. it. *Meditazioni universali*; Werner Kaegi, *Historische Meditationen* (Zürich: Fretz & Wasmuth, 1942-46), ed. it. *Meditazioni storiche* (Bari: Laterza 1960), pp. 156-215; *Jakob C. Burckhardt als politischer Publizist; mit seinen Zeitungsberichten aus den Jahren 1844/45*. Aus dem Nachlass E. Dürs, a c. di Werner Kaegi (Zürich: Fretz & Wasmuth, 1937; Basel-Stuttgart, 1956), pp. 673-674, 704-705.

<sup>12</sup> Del Baron si veda specialmente *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance; Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* [1955], ed. riv. in 1 vol. con un epilogo (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966). Dei numerosi lavori del Garin sull'argomento basterà menzionare *L'Umanesimo Italiano. Filosofia e vita civile nel Rinascimento* (Bari: Laterza, 1965).



luogo dopo il lavoro del Burckhardt. Per incominciare, lo studio su San Francesco di Heinrich Thode (1885) ed i lavori di Konrad Burdach (1914, 1918, 1935)<sup>13</sup> mossero il centro del Rinascimento verso il campo spirituale, perfino teologico, come parte di ciò che essi percepivano come desiderio di rinascita nella scia del centenario spirito di rinnovamento e riforma. In breve, questi due studiosi posero al centro dell'attenzione la tradizione del Vecchio e Nuovo Testamento. L'opposizione fra la posizione del Burckhardt e quella del Burdach era l'opposizione ideologica fra la posizione liberal-borghese e la democratica, nel senso che quest'ultima prendeva in conto il punto di vista e gli interessi delle classi inferiori. Era l'opposizione fra l'interpretazione pagana del Rinascimento come avallamento della fiducia dell'uomo moderno nelle sue proprie forze, attraverso il ricorso ai modelli pagani dell'antichità, da un lato, e l'interpretazione religiosa del Rinascimento come momento di rinascita morale e spirituale, dall'altro. Il punto di vista liberale postulava una continuità fra il Rinascimento e il razionalismo del Periodo Classico e poi l'Illuminismo. Il punto di vista democratico-religioso, invece, vedeva nel Romanticismo dell'Ottocento la tarda fruizione di quella scintilla di democratismo nazionalistico che era presumibilmente emerso nel Rinascimento. In Italia, le due posizioni contribuirono alla tesi liberale del rapporto diretto fra Rinascimento e Risorgimento.<sup>14</sup>

Lo schema storiografico del Baron puntava direttamente su uno dei temi più centrali in ogni periodo della storia occidentale, quello della libertà politica come espressione e banco di prova della realtà della sovranità popolare. Nel 1924 aveva avuto luogo un dibattito fra Piero Gobetti e Benito Mussolini sul vero significato di Machiavelli, in termini che comportavano una interpretazione della natura profonda del Rinascimento. In *Gerarchia* Mussolini dichiarò il *Principe* culmine del pensiero di Machiavelli, e il concetto di sovranità effimero e inconsistente, dato che il popolo non poteva essere che una somma di individui senza direzione e senza volontà: "l'aggettivo di sovrano applicato al popolo è una tragica burla".<sup>15</sup> Gobetti rispose rivendicando al Machiavelli "la fede nelle forze popolari, una coscienza del popolo come fondamento dello Stato, che non si

<sup>13</sup> Thode, *Franz von Assisi und die Anfänge der Kunst der Renaissance in Italien* (Berlino: G. Grote, 1885; 4<sup>a</sup> ed. Vienna: Phaidon, 1934); Burdach, *Reformation--Renaissance--Humanismus* (1<sup>a</sup> ed. 1918; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1935, 3<sup>a</sup> ed. 1963); *Riforma, Rinascimento, Umanesimo. Due dissertazioni sui fondamenti della cultura e dell'arte della parola moderna*, a c. di Delio Cantimori (Firenze: Sansoni, 1935).

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Benedetto Croce, "La crisi italiana del Cinquecento e il legame del Rinascimento col Risorgimento", trad. inglese in Eric Cochrane (a c. di), *The Late Italian Renaissance* (1970), pp. 401-411.

<sup>15</sup> *Gerarchia: Rassegna Mensile della Rivoluzione Fascista* (1922-43) era una rivista ufficiale del partito. Pochissime copie complete sono disponibili in biblioteche pubbliche. Ho consultato la copia su microfilm della New York Public Library.

spiega soltanto con la nascita fiorentina, con la passione repubblicana . . . , con gli entusiasmi umanistici" della gioventù del Machiavelli, ma con un solido sfondo teorico che, possiamo aggiungere noi, aveva le sue radici nella dottrina medievale della sovranità popolare, perfino e proprio nei circoli guelfi romani. Per Gobetti "l'utopia del *Principe* si è rivelata assurda perfino per il tempo in cui è stata creata; . . . credere che lo Stato rudimentale del *Principe* possa essere lo Stato moderno, significa non soltanto ignorare la storia europea di quattro secoli, ma dichiararsi meno attuale di Machiavelli stesso". Era un puntuale ribattere alle parole e agli argomenti di Mussolini.<sup>16</sup>

E' stato detto che lo stato come opera d'arte, come lo chiamò il Burckhardt, è un mito. Seguendo Gobetti, Antonio Gramsci (1934) sottolineò l'astrattezza del "principe" come individuo: Machiavelli si rendeva conto che la realtà del potere e del governo è l'approvazione o almeno l'accettazione da parte del popolo, la cui coscienza collettiva trova la sua epifania nella formazione di gruppi "popolari" che determinano le condizioni di una forma di governo che possa aver successo, un "sistema" che in tempi moderni prende forma di partiti organizzati, al tempo del Machiavelli di gruppi dirigenti (compresi gruppi all'opposizione, come gli amici degli Orti Oricellari).<sup>17</sup>

Poco dopo, in un articolo del 1935 su *Civiltà Moderna* intitolato "La Rinasceita dell'etica statale romana nell'umanesimo fiorentino del Quattrocento", Hans Baron mise il dito per la prima volta sull'esperienza cruciale del libero governo rappresentativo della Firenze liberale-borghese-democratica per il sorgere dell'Umanesimo nella sua forma "civica". Questo nuovo spirito aveva le sue basi nelle opere di Aristotele e Cicerone. Né a Giovanni Gentile né allo stesso Mussolini sfuggì l'orientamento ideologico della rivista liberale che aveva ospitato la tesi del Baron. Gentile — che, ad un livello personale, non esitò ad aiutare tanto Baron che Kristeller, ebrei rifugiati dalle leggi di Norimberga, nella loro più buia ora di bisogno — si lagnò del tono polemico del titolo programmatico della rivista, e Mussolini scelse nientemeno che il foro ufficiale di una seduta del Gran Consiglio del Fascismo per criticare la rivista.<sup>18</sup> Nel 1938

<sup>16</sup> Mussolini, "Preludio al 'Machiavelli'", *Gerarchia* 3 (1924): 205-209, specialmente p. 208. Gobetti, "Commento a un Preludio" (non firmato), *Rivoluzione liberale* 3 (1924): 77; ora in P. Gobetti, *Opere complete* a c. di Paolo Spriano, vol. 1: *Scritti politici* (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1960), p. 673. Cfr. Michele Ciliberto, *Il Rinascimento: storia di un dibattito* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1988), pp. 33-34. Quella del Gobetti era una nota di prefazione a passi dei *Discorsi* di Machiavelli riportati in fermamente polemica risposta alle affermazioni di Mussolini. I passi erano *Discorsi* II vi, "dedicato a Mussolini: impero e democrazia"; I vi, "dedicato all'impero: democrazia e imperialismo"; I iv, "dedicato agli uomini d'ordine"; I xi, "dedicato ai Mussoliniani"; e I ii, "Ritratto di . . . Appio Claudio".

<sup>17</sup> Gramsci, *Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e sullo stato moderno* (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1949, 6<sup>a</sup> ed. 1966), p. 5. Cfr. Ciliberto (1988), p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. Ciliberto (1988), pp. 34-36, con riferimento ad A. Broccoli, "La Nuova Italia e *Civiltà*

Baron procedette a documentare ulteriormente il suo caso in un saggio che apparve dinuovo in Italia in italiano, col titolo "Lo sfondo storico del Rinascimento fiorentino", *La Rinascita* 1 (1938): 50-72, un assaggio di quella che sarebbe diventata la sua opera principale, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance; Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (1955).<sup>19</sup>

Quello che successe nel Rinascimento è che si giuocarono le fortune delle opposte concezioni della sovranità popolare da un lato e, dall'altro, la sovranità di principi o detentori di potere per diritto divino o di pura forza, con la vittoria, per i prossimi due secoli decimosettimo e decimottavo, della seconda soluzione. Il potere dei governi assoluti che ne seguirono fu concretizzato in sistemi di corte, dove il comportamento pubblico e diplomatico/burocratico fu codicizzato in un'etica cortigiana la cui complessa storia appartiene ad ogni tempo. La cortigianeria o *curialitas* come l'hanno conosciuta i tempi moderni nasce nel medioevo. E' stato dimostrato recentemente, soprattutto negli studi del Germanista C. Stephen Jaeger, che l'arte diplomatica della dissimulazione ha un antecedente chiaro e notevole nella tradizione didattico-morale dell'educazione del diplomatico alto-ecclesiastico delle corti imperiali sassoni a cominciare dal decimo secolo, e che tale tradizione si rispecchia brillantemente nella letteratura cortese del tipo della leggenda di Tristano.<sup>20</sup>

Il *cortegiano* del Rinascimento italiano risultò essere più vicino al *curialis* che al cavaliere, anche se si tien conto della nomenclatura personale di *sprezzatura*, *grazia*, e (negativa) *affettazione* nel Castiglione. Invero, dovrebbe essere evidente che quei tre termini del Castiglione sono facilmente riconoscibili reinterpretazioni di tre qualità fondamentali del cavaliere e del cortigiano della letteratura romanzesca e dei trattati di condotta del medioevo, cioè la misura (fr. *mesure*, ted. *mâze*), buone maniere (fr. *manières*, ted. *zuht*), e reticenza come parte della *mansuetudo*. Quest'ultima comprendeva quella naturalezza che era parte del comportamento nobile ed era associata con il tipo di dissimulazione che si trova, ad esempio, nel giovane Tristano di Goffredo di Strasburgo. *Urbanitas* includeva il discorso elegante e spiritoso, quindi pure la *facetia* (Jaeger 1985, 154f., 162), e qui pensiamo immediatamente alla famosa sezione del *Cortegiano* 2.42-83 sulle arguzie. Altre qualità classiche che il Castiglione derivava da Cicerone ed Orazio erano anche riflesse nei ritratti medievali di *curialitas*, cioè una combinazione di *decus*, *honestas* e *mediocritas*: cfr. *Il Cortegiano* 1.41 "certa onesta mediocrità," 3.5 "certa mediocrità difficile e quasi composta di cose

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Moderna: il momento della crisi", *Scuola e Città* 18 (1967): 247-251.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. Eugenio Garin, "Le prime ricerche di Hans Baron sul Quattrocento e la loro influenza fra le due guerre", in *Renaissance Studies in honor of Hans Baron*, a c. di Anthony Molho e John Tedeschi (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press e Firenze: G. C. Sansoni, 1971), pp. 61-63.

<sup>20</sup> C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939-1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).



contrarie". Tutto sommato, è alquanto ironico che un testo che ad un De Sanctis o un Burckhardt sembrava un modello di secolarismo rinascimentale è, invece, così legato a prospettive clericali di lunga data.

Uno scrittore di gran successo dopo Erasmo, il maestro dell'*estilo culto* Antonio de Guevara (1480-1545), era un alto cortigiano al servizio di Carlo V in Spagna. La sua opera più famosa è il *Libro aureo de Marco Aurelio* (Il libro d'oro di Marco Aurelio, 1528), riveduto come *Relox de príncipes* (Orologio dei principi, 1529), settecento pagine di repertorio manieristico di topoi predicatori scritti in uno stile eufuistico *avant-la-lettre*, come Norden e Croll lo descrissero.<sup>21</sup> Fu un immediato *best-seller* in tutta Europa. In Italia ambedue le versioni, *Libro aureo* e *Relox*, ricevettero due traduzioni ciascuna.<sup>22</sup> In due opere seguenti, l'*Aviso de privados y despertador de cortesanos* (Avviso ai favoriti e sveglia dei cortigiani),<sup>23</sup> e il *Menosprecio de corte y alabanza de aldea* (Disprezzo della corte e elogio della campagna, Valladolid),<sup>24</sup> ambedue pubblicati dieci anni dopo il *Relox*, Guevara riuscì a capovolgere e sovvertire tanto il classicismo quanto l'Umanesimo rinascimentale in una energica ripresa della critica medievale delle corti, ma in un contesto che la Controriforma avrebbe visto con favore e che ricordava il concetto medievale di *mesure* nel suo porre l'accento sull'*aurea mediocritas* o *mensura*. Questi risuscitati sentimenti anticortigiani furono espressi volgendo il tema dello "specchio dei principi" ad un teatro del mondo sottosopra. La corte apparve implicitamente come uno specchio del mondo di Satana, Principe delle Tenebre, opposto al buon principe come Principe della Luce (la luce del Sole in Erasmo). Anche questo nuovo ascetismo e misticismo servivano agli scopi dell'assolutismo. Il *Menosprecio* del Guevara, le cui fonti principali erano il *Policraticus* di Giovanni da Salisburgo, il *De curialium miseriis* di Enea Silvio Piccolomini e il *De vita solitaria* del Petrarca, fece uso del mondo della pastorale per elogiare la vita di campagna come correttivo alla pazza e empia corruzione delle corti, esortando i cortigiani ad abbandonare la corte e la città per la vita onesta della campagna. Troveremo, in

<sup>21</sup> La prima edizione (Sevilla: Jácobo Cromberger), non autorizzata, fu immediatamente riveduta, assai ampliata, e pubblicata col nuovo titolo (Valladolid: Nicolás Tierri). Vedi l'analisi del Croll dell'*ornatus* pesantemente gorgianico nello stile "schematico" nel suo saggio "The Sources of the Euphuistic Rhetoric" [1916], ristampato in J. Max Patrick e Robert O. Evans (a c. di), *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm. Essays by Morris W. Croll* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) 241-295, spec. 252-254. John Lyly ha fama di essere stato influenzato dal Guevara nel suo *Euphues*. Vedi l'utile rassegna di Joseph R. Jones, *Antonio de Guevara* (Boston: Twayne, 1975).

<sup>22</sup> Sul successo del Guevara in Italia vedi Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300-1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 300-304 e 422-424 sulle edizioni italiane, senza alcuna menzione del *Menosprecio*. Cfr. Quondam in Prosperi (1980), cit., 41-54 sul *Relox* e 63-68 sul *Menosprecio*.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. l'edizione di A. Alvarez de la Villa (Paris: Louis Michaud, [1912 o 1914]).

<sup>24</sup> *Menosprecio*, a c. di M. Martínez de Burgos (Madrid: Ediciones de "La Letura", 1915).

forma assai piú velata, lo stesso motivo di dover lasciare la corte per conservare l'onestà nella *Civil Conversazione* del Guazzo. Certo, quella campagna era popolata non da veri contadini ma da gentiluomini mutati in pastori, i quali non potevano comportarsi secondo altro codice se non quello della corte, che la corte era accusata di aver tradito.<sup>25</sup> Lo spostamento del luogo non significava spostamento del codice. Tali riferimenti in chiave pastorale a motivi cortigiani, che riempiono la letteratura del Rinascimento e del barocco, rimisero in voga il modo virgiliano di rivestire con il velo arcadico allegorie politiche e financo allusioni economiche personali.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Riguardo ai motivi interiori per questa svolta verso la pastorale vedi, ad esempio, *Menosprecio*, a c. di Martínez de Burgos, 180: "Oh quante volte fui colto dal desiderio di ritirarmi dalla corte e dal mondo per diventare eremita o certosino; ma non desiderai questo perché fossi virtuoso ma perché ero disperato, perché il re non mi dava quello che volevo avere e il favorito rifiutò di ricevermi". (Traduzione mia, ma vedi J. R. Jones, *Antonio de Guevara*, 94). Si suppone che l'*Aviso* abbia avuto un'influenza importante sulla satira del cortigiano/favorito nel romanzo picaresco a cominciare con il *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554); cfr. Jones 87-89.

<sup>26</sup> Una storia delle implicazioni sociali della pastorale e del mito arcadico (il topos dell'Età dell'Oro) rimane ancora da scrivere. Richiederebbe una rivalutazione di funzioni antropologiche, religiose e storiografiche, non solo in una ampia rassegna del mito nei suoi impieghi letterari, ma spiegando, ad esempio, perché tanti autori associati alla vita di corte trattarono il mito in uno spirito di desiderato ritiro utopico dal mondo, cioè dalle realtà della vita di corte. A volte fu usato come un atto di fuga o di rifiuto, altre volte come riforma interiore. Alcuni stimolanti contributi sono: Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky e Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (1964); Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour. Archétypes et répétitions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949; 1969; 1985); traduzione dell'ed. del 1949 in *Cosmos and History; The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), e *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965; Garland, 1985; London: Routledge, 1988); Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); Gustavo Costa, *La leggenda dei secoli d'oro nella letteratura italiana* (Bari: Laterza, 1972); Frank E. e Fritzie P. Manuel, "Sketch for a Natural History of Paradise", *Daedalus* (Winter 1972): 83-128. Il mito godette di ubiquità anche prima della nascita della pastorale come genere classico. Brunetto Latini, ad esempio, aveva espresso il suo fondo comunale borghese rifiutando quell'elemento del mito che riteneva l'uomo primitivo virtuoso e felice: solo la ragione, la cultura e la città creano le condizioni per quello che, senza di esse, è soltanto un animale. Cfr. Brunetto, *Li livres dou Tresor* 8.1; anche nella classica versione toscana di Bono Giamboni: *Il Tesoro di Brunetto Latini volgarizzato da Bono Giamboni*, a c. di Luigi Gaiter (Bologna: Commissione per i Testi di Lingua, 1878-1883) 4:11. Questa è la sola ed. completa ma non è considerata metodologicamente corretta (cfr. *La prosa del Duecento*, a c. di Cesare Segre e Mario Marti [Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1959] 1072). La versione di Giamboni de *Il Tesoro* era stata stampata a Treviso: Gerardo Flandino, 1474, e Venezia: per Marchio Sessa, 1533, e così via; quella dell'*Etica* di Brunetto a Firenze: Domenico Maria Manni, 1734. Può darsi che Dante sia stato colpito da quest'argomento del Latini, che d'altra parte si sentiva spesso nell'ambiente democratico dei comuni, come ad esempio in Fazio degli Uberti (*Dittamondo* 1.12:52-91) e nuovamente, piú tardi, nella Firenze di Cosimo de' Medici, nel famoso quadro "realistico" di Piero di Cosimo studiato da

Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), un intellettuale che si creò il suo mercato letterario vendendo gloria mentre comprava successo mondano e un'effimera influenza, ebbe in Italia, nel suo modo bizzarro, un ruolo analogo a quello del Guevara. Il suo *Ragionamento delle corti* (1538) fu un radicale anti-Cortegiano dove la corte fu pittorescamente designata come "spedale delle speranze, sepoltura delle vite, . . . mercato delle menzogne, scola de le fraudi, . . . paradiso de i vizi, inferno de le virtù. . . . Né ermo, né bosco, né caverna, né tomba, . . . sia pur quanto si voglia orrida, . . . bestiale. . . ." <sup>27</sup> La corte che l'Aretino conosceva meglio era quella di Roma, che egli criticava dal sicuro rifugio di Venezia.

I *Ricordi* di Saba da Castiglione (Bologna 1546; edizione ampliata Venezia 1554; pubblicati ventisei volte prima della fine del secolo) similmente attingevano dal Guevara su un tenore più controllato e ordinato. Monsignore e cavaliere di Malta, Saba introdusse i dogmi tridentini e il catechismo nell'educazione del principe, con l'aggiunta delle qualità prescritte di comportamento come "maestà, gravità, modestia, maturità e decoro". <sup>28</sup> Egli portò oltre la critica della corte del Guevara denunciando le corti contemporanee come tane di vizi e di degenerazione morale (37v). Nel capitolo dei suoi *Ricordi* che trattava de "La cortegiania dei nostri tempi" egli capovolse tutte le virtù tradizionali dei cortigiani, ora tutti degenerati, volgendole ai loro contrari, dato che sono tutti "vili, ignoranti, adulatori, assentatori, parassiti, lenoni, per non dire ruffiani, malcreati, bugiardi". <sup>29</sup> È d'uopo rendersi conto del cambiamento di situazione rispetto alla critica della corte che era dovuta all'ascetismo medievale. Laddove i critici medievali operavano dal difuori delle corti e propugnavano un modo di vita alternativo — gli ordini monastici e la Chiesa riformata — critici come Guevara e Saba non potevano facilmente uscire dal loro ambiente, dato che la corte era il loro unico mondo: quello che essi proponevano non era altro che una corte travestita o riformata. Saba anche ricuperò il Castiglione attraverso la sua nozione di "giusto mezzo" fra "affettazione" e "naturalità" — una nuova

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Panofsky: v. Erwin Panofsky, "The Early History of Man in Two Cycles of Paintings by Piero di Cosimo", in *Studies in Iconology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962). In quell'ambiente alla felicità pastorale di perfetto ozio si contrapponeva consciamente la sicurezza che i valori sociali sono il risultato dell'attività umana, il "lavoro", comprendente il lavoro agricolo opposto all'*otium* dei pastori. Per i nobili, invece, compresi gli ambienti cortigiani e gli alti mercanti sulla strada verso lo stato signorile, come i Medici, l'Età dell'Oro della felicità umana coincideva con il vivere idillico dell'*otium* pastorale: vedi Lorenzo, *Selve d'Amore* 2.84-2.112, in Lorenzo de' Medici, *Opere*, a c. di Attilio Simioni, 2 vol. (Bari: G. Laterza, 1913-1914; 2d ed. 1939) 1: 274-281.

<sup>27</sup> Ed. a c. di G. Battelli (Lanciano: Carabba, 1914) 11, 14-15. Cfr. Franco Gaeta in Alberto Asor Rosa (a c. di), *Letteratura Italiana* 1 (Torino: Einaudi, 1982): 251-253.

<sup>28</sup> F. 27r dell'ed. Venezia: Gherardo, 1554. Quondam in Prosperi (1980): 56-67.

<sup>29</sup> Citato da Aldo Vallone, *Cortesie e nobiltà nel Rinascimento* (Asti: Arethusa, 1955) 73, dall'ed. di Saba del 1554.



veste per la *sprezzatura*. Nel Saba la facilmente appariscente, conformistica cristianizzazione del genere del cortigiano, del principe e del *cavaliere* sono diventati intimamente clericalizzati.<sup>30</sup> Le virtù essenziali del cortigiano/gentiluomo dovevano essere la *modestia*, la *magnanimità* e l'*umiltà*.

Anche prima certi trattati didattici avevano incominciato ad assimilare valori di corte agli ideali della Controriforma. Il pio autore anonimo del *Novo corteggiano de vita cauta e morale* (probabilmente pubblicato a Venezia da un editore non identificabile nel 1530 o 1535) tentò di educare una classe dirigente aristocratica secondo principi di *aurea mediocritas* che si ispiravano più ad ideali di ritiro dai pericoli del mondo che da un apprezzamento positivo della vita di corte.<sup>31</sup> L'elogio delle "amene solitudini" della campagna suona simile al più tardo appello pastorale al tema della campagna in contrasto con la città/corte nel *Menosprecio* del Guevara. Similmente il genovese Pellegro Grimaldi Robbio scrisse un fortunato libro di *Discorsi ne' quali si ragiona di quanto far debbono i gentilhuomini ne' servigi de' lor signori per acquistarsi la gratia loro* (1543), dove echi del Castiglione sono altrettanto evidenti che il tentativo di clericizzarlo spostando il principale punto di riferimento alla Curia Romana. In questi prestiti dal Castiglione notiamo la generalizzazione tanto del metodo che della materia, che ora copre largamente le classi educate dei "gentiluomini". Stefano Guazzo avrebbe continuato tale orientamento nella sua *Civil conversatione* (1574). E' una letteratura che esprime un malessere che veniva fuori dall'acuta delusione della vita di corte.<sup>32</sup>

Dopo Castiglione, il suo serio interesse per la sostanza morale dell'uomo di corte venne a prendere secondo posto rispetto all'arte di parlar con eleganza e efficacia in pubblico. L'arte del cortigiano divenne una sorta di retorica della corte e della conversazione elegante. Guazzo rappresentò bene questa riduzione dell'orizzonte secondo una moda diffusa che era forse più pronunciata in Spagna che altrove, come dimostra chiaramente la traduzione spagnola del *Cortegiano* ne *El libro entitulado el Cortesano* (1561) di Luis Milán, dedicato a Filippo II. L'eroe del Milán deve parlar bene ma soprattutto, pare, su cose innocue, purché piacevoli e spiritose--deve essere un buon motteggiatore, *motejador*. Per quanto l'enfasi sull'oralità fosse destinata ad ulteriori sviluppi in Francia, la Spagna di Filippo II fornì un fertile terreno per la virtù della reticenza di medievale memoria: oltre a sapere come parlare bene, il nuovo eroe, *el cortesano*, cioè "el

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<sup>30</sup> C. Donati (1988) 64-66; Quondam in Prosperi (1980) 54-58; Claudio Scarpati, *Studi sul Cinquecento italiano* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1982), "Ricerche su Sabba da Castiglione" 27-125. Dello Scarpati vedi pure *Dire la verità al principe* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> A. Prosperi, "Libri sulla corte ed esperienze curiali nel primo '500 italiano" in Prosperi (1980) 69-91 a 69-72.

<sup>32</sup> Genova: Antonio Bellomo, 1543; Venetia: ad instantia di M. Pelegro de Grimaldi author de l'opera, 1544. Prosperi (1980) 72-77. L'autore rimproverò il Castiglione di aver posto un fine impossibile a raggiungere: vedi l'ed. di Venezia (1544), folio 6r.

caballero armado virtuoso, la mejor criatura de la tierra", ha da sapere quando è più opportuno tacere: "bien hablar y callar donde es menester."<sup>33</sup> Sentiamo qui un nuovo ripiegarsi, un far marcia indietro allontanandosi dal migliore Castiglione, quello che coltivava nella mente un agente individualistico e relativamente indipendente; ora non si contemplan più che puri servitori, prudenti maestri di diplomazia e autorinuncia. Questa nuova piega si rinveniva già nel già menzionato Pellegrino Grimaldi, che nei suoi *Discorsi* (1543) non volle discutere le virtù di un completo cortigiano ma solo l'arte di sopravvivere, da assommare nel consiglio conclusivo: "tenete (come si dice) la bocca chiusa", dopo di aver fatto tutto quello che piace al principe — e nulla più.<sup>34</sup>

In *Della dissimulazione onesta* (Napoli, 1641) il napoletano Torquato Accetto mostrò rassegnazione controriformistica nel proporre che non si esiti a dissimulare fino al giorno del Giudizio, quando ciò non sarebbe più necessario-- non perché al cospetto di Dio sarebbe evidentemente fuori posto ricorrere ad altro che l'assoluta verità, ma perché "allora saran finiti gl'interessi umani!"<sup>35</sup>

Con tutto questo non si deve trascurare l'aspetto positivo della cosa, ed è su questa nota che voglio concludere il mio discorso. Il cortigiano/gentiluomo fu il più eccelso modello di un tipo di cultura e civiltà che si basava, per meglio o per peggio, in un modo di guardare in alto. Abbiamo difficoltà oggi a capire e misurare tali fenomeni, dato che la nostra cultura si è inesorabilmente allontanata dal criterio, diciamo platonico, dei "modelli" deontologici, muovendo decisamente nella direzione opposta. Pensiamo alla gioia della rivolta e del rifiuto, anche della trasgressione, che caratterizza tanta cultura moderna. In un assai popolare e assai criticato programma televisivo americano i due giovanili protagonisti Beavis e Butt-Head hanno tanta fortuna perché, si dice e si ammette pubblicamente, i giovani si identificano con questi anteroi che si diletta di fare il male, un male apertamente antisociale e antieducativo.

Potrei aggiungere altre citazioni per il loro elegante contributo, per esempio La Fontaine, *Fables* VII 1, "Les animaux malades de la peste": "Selon que vous serez puissant ou misérable, Les jugements de cour vous rendront blanc ou noir". L'asino sarà sacrificato invece di animali da preda perché non può difendersi dall'accusa di aver mangiato un po' d'erba altrui, mentre gli altri hanno mangiato interi esseri viventi! Ma vorrei veramente chiudere ritornando all'autore con cui lo aprii, cioè il La Rochefoucauld, che assommò nella sua stessa carriera come nei suoi scritti l'esperienza della più consumata e raffinata dissimulazione

<sup>33</sup> Citato da Quondam in Prosperi (1980): 30, dall'ed. di Madrid: Aribau (1874) 2.

<sup>34</sup> 9v, 36r-37r nelle edizioni del 1543 e del 1544. C. Donati (1988) 62. Una delle più di cento frasi proverbiali che adornano la *Civil conversatione* del Guazzo suona in modo simile: "il tacere a tempo è più lodato che il ben parlare".

<sup>35</sup> Torquato Accetto, *Della dissimulazione onesta*, ed. Goffredo Bellonci (Firenze: Sansoni, 1943). Si veda, però, sul testo assai discusso dell'Accetto, Rosario Villari, *Elogio della dissimulazione. La lotta politica nel Seicento* (Bari: Laterza, 1987).

diplomata. Rileggiamo due delle sue massime sulla dissimulazione: "L'interesse ci fa assumere tante maschere, compresa quella del disinteressato"; "La sincerità è un'apertura di cuore naturale; si trova in pochissime persone, e quella che si pratica comunemente non è altro che una sottile dissimulazione per acquistare la fiducia del prossimo".<sup>36</sup> Quando troviamo tali pensieri, ad esempio, presso un La Rochefoucauld e poi alla corte di Versailles, possiamo pensare che la fonte più vicina possa essere proprio quella dei commentatori rinascimentali italiani come Machiavelli e, più ancora, Guicciardini. Certamente gli Italiani non inventarono la pratica, e nemmeno la teoria, ma svilupparono l'una e l'altra in un'arte raffinata nell'epoca del Rinascimento: parlo dell'arte della duplicità e dissimulazione come parte integrante della diplomazia soprattutto di corte. Insomma, l'arte del cortigiano.

*New York University*

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<sup>36</sup> "L'intérêt fait jouer toute sorte de personnages, et même celui de désintéressé"; "La sincérité est une naturelle ouverture du cœur: on la trouve en fort peu de gens: et celle qui se pratique d'ordinaire n'est qu'une fine dissimulation pour arriver à la confiance des autres". La Rochefoucauld, *Oeuvres complètes*, a c. di L. Martin-Chauffier (Parigi: Gallimard, 1964): Masime 156 e 158, p. 329, dall'edizione dell'Aja del 1664.



## ITALIAN BOOKSHELF

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**Marco Santoro. *Storia del libro italiano. Libro e società in Italia dal Quattrocento al Novecento*. Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 1994. Pp. VIII + 446.**

In questo esauriente studio l'autore traccia gli affascinanti e complessi percorsi attraverso i quali il libro italiano (e non solo il libro, visto che una cospicua parte dell'opera riguarda la produzione periodica e giornalistica) prende forma e si evolve a partire dalla più antica tradizione manoscritta fino all'ultimo decennio del secolo ventesimo. L'opera è organizzata in sette grandi sezioni cronologiche, ciascuna delle quali contiene una premessa informativa intorno al quadro politico-economico e alle istituzioni, ai centri e ai gruppi culturali operanti in un particolare periodo, sí da collocare storicamente le annotazioni critiche e statistiche successive. In questo modo l'abbondanza dei dati è saldamente ancorata a un contesto che ne fornisce il filo conduttore e la chiave interpretativa.

In un primo momento il passaggio dall'"ars naturaliter scribendi" (la tecnica manuale della tradizione) all'"ars artificialiter scribendi" (la nuova tecnica di composizione meccanica del testo) si svolge gradualmente e a lungo perdura la vitalità della prima, che anzi funge da modello imprescindibile sulla base del quale si plasmerà poco per volta il "miracoloso procedimento" della stampa. La transizione riveste un carattere rivoluzionario pari per importanza alle grandi scoperte geografiche del momento, e comporta un modo nuovo di sentire e di affrontare il problema della comunicazione scritta. Gli anni che vanno dal 1500 al 1600 vedono il consolidamento della nuova arte e il sorgere di una coscienza nuova efficacemente espressa dal medico bolognese Leonardo Fioravanti, il quale nello *Specchio di scientia universale* celebra la funzione benefica di pungolo sociale e culturale della stampa: "La stampa, infatti, secondo Fioravanti ha risvegliato il mondo addormentato nell'ignoranza e, consentendo la crescita dei lettori reclutati e reclutabili anche fra i meno abbienti, ha generato lo smascheramento di coloro che,

'adorati e riveriti come se fossero stati huomini divini', precedentemente potevano impunemente anche 'cacciare carotte quanto loro piaceva, che non era chi contradicesse loro'" (91).

L'autore ritiene che la stampa italiana del Seicento non abbia ricevuto l'attenzione critica che merita, a causa della tendenza generale a sottolineare soprattutto il "suo modesto valore estetico" e la "sua scarsa emblematicità iconografica". Mentre la presenza di un filone dotto, distinto da un filone popolare, si accentua notevolmente nel corso di tale periodo, non si può parlare, secondo Santoro, di una crisi totale e tutta al negativo: non si può "stigmatizzare l'editoria del tempo come editoria in declino che ha attraversato una lunga crisi di depressione, non tenendo nella dovuta considerazione che in quel periodo, *comunque* furono per la prima volta impiantate stamperie in vari centri della penisola, *comunque* crebbe il numero degli operatori nel settore, *comunque* la produzione fu incrementata, *comunque* la possibilità di 'comunicare' fu accresciuta, *comunque* l'opportunità di divulgare certe idee e certe ideologie, prevalentemente ma non unicamente quelle conservatrici, fu maggiormente sfruttata, *comunque* i processi di alfabetizzazione e di acculturazione . . . fecero registrare ulteriori passi avanti" (160).

Il fervore libertario che percorre l'età dell'Illuminismo investe naturalmente l'attività editoriale che a sua volta diventa il tramite privilegiato di una vasta e capillare operazione ideologica. Le pubblicazioni periodiche si affermano un po' dovunque, permettendo uno scambio rapido di idee e opinioni e un ricambio altrettanto rapido di ossigeno intellettuale. Come fa notare Santoro, "libertà di stampa significa anche tutela della stampa" (221) ed è sintomatico che proprio nel Settecento si introducano in più stati leggi riguardanti la produzione e la regolamentazione della stampa e del commercio librario.

Nel secolo successivo Milano strappa a Venezia il primato per quantità di libri e di pubblicazioni in genere che la città lagunare aveva detenuto più o meno incontrastata fin dai primordi della stampa. Il numero di aziende tipografiche nella penisola si moltiplica in maniera sorprendente di concerto con l'aumento dei punti di vendita, anche in concomitanza con il processo di unificazione nazionale. Un altro dato appare interessante: il netto calo in percentuale delle pubblicazioni a carattere religioso rispetto ai secoli precedenti: "un segnale, che assume il significato di una conferma, della crescente emarginazione del clero dall'intellettualità e dai circuiti comunicativi nonché dalle strutture didattiche" (300-301).

Ai primi del Novecento il panorama dell'industria tipografica nella penisola offre un quadro di notevole modernità e di considerevole intraprendenza con il sorgere di grandi stabilimenti poligrafici.

Successivamente l'era fascista, nello sforzo di uniformare ogni aspetto della vita nazionale all'ideologia del regime, rivolge notevoli energie anche alle varie attività culturali, non pervenendo mai comunque ad una vera e propria fascistizzazione della cultura, ma riuscendo invece ad instaurare una fascistizzazione dell'editoria e del mondo librario (311). Si stabilisce pertanto una specie di intesa fra editori e regime che consente una notevole espansione delle attività editoriali: "Questa solidarietà

agisce . . . principalmente su tre piani: la dilatazione dei neo-lettori, col potenziamento della scuola elementare e complementare nonché delle biblioteche per il popolo; il rafforzamento della cultura nazionale in contrapposizione a quella straniera . . . ; l'esportazione all'estero a beneficio dei milioni di emigrati" (313). Nonostante nel corso del ventennio si parli a più riprese di crisi del libro, Santoro fa notare che rispetto alla situazione di altri paesi come la Francia, la Germania, la Gran Bretagna e gli Stati Uniti, l'Italia presenta una situazione di straordinaria vitalità ed espansione.

È nel 1944 che "per obiettivi frangenti . . . l'editoria tocca il fondo. . . Ma le potenzialità per una ripresa sia pure non facile non mancano" (322). Fra il 1951 e il 1960 emerge una nuova generazione di editori più in sintonia con le trasformazioni sociali e tecnologiche in corso, e disposti a seguire la lezione offerta dai modelli inglesi e americani. Eppure, nonostante il fervore generale e la nascita di nuove imprese editoriali, si verifica una contrazione del mercato dovuta all'affermarsi di nuovi canali d'informazione, come la radio e la televisione e la stampa soprattutto settimanale. Negli anni Cinquanta si afferma definitivamente la cosiddetta "paraletteratura" (fumetti, romanzi polizieschi, libri di spionaggio e fantascienza) dietro la spinta del mito nordamericano, in relazione anche alla grande popolarità di cui gode la cinematografia statunitense. Gli anni Sessanta vedono un'ulteriore proliferazione delle case editrici con Milano e Roma sempre in testa, e in generale sanciscono "il profondo divario . . . fra l'intraprendenza economico-culturale centro-settentrionale e quella meridionale" (332). Nel decennio poi si assiste all'espansione rapida di due forme editoriali: quella a dispense e quella tascabile. Si moltiplicano ulteriormente le case editrici negli anni Settanta, ma al tempo stesso "ci si abitua ad attribuire un'esistenza transitoria al libro, a classificarlo come supporto di segni da 'riconoscere' e al più da 'assimilare' e non già da 'valutare' e 'rielaborare'" (341). Da questo punto in poi, secondo Santoro, è come se l'industria editoriale attraversasse una continua crisi d'identità, sottoposta com'è a forti pressioni da parte degli altri strumenti di comunicazione. Il panorama degli anni Ottanta e Novanta è estremamente fluido e instabile, mentre è abbastanza chiaro un dato di fatto evidenziato dagli studi statistici dell'ISTAT, e cioè che gli italiani leggono molto poco, e il problema si può ricondurre, secondo l'autore, all'istruzione scolastica: "la scuola . . . incontra grossissime difficoltà a realizzare il proprio peculiare obiettivo: insegnare a 'saper leggere', e non a 'leggere' soltanto" (361-362).

L'opera è bene impostata e corredata da abbondanti note bibliografiche, ed è utilissima allo studioso di italianistica che voglia esplorare o approfondire i rapporti fra il prodotto letterario e l'evoluzione dei vari canali e metodi della diffusione scritta.



*Italianistica. Rivista di letteratura italiana.* 21:2-3 (1992). Fasc. spec. *Studi in memoria di Giorgio Varanini. I - Dal Duecento al Quattrocento.*

Ricco di inediti, ponderoso nella qualità dei contenuti, oltre che nella quantità, questo numero speciale di "Italianistica", che D. De Camilli, M. Dell'Aquila e B. Porcelli sottotitolano *Studi in memoria di G. Varanini*, è il primo dei due destinati a onorare l'illustre scomparso. È superfluo ricordare come i secoli che vanno dalle Origini al Cinquecento, e che sono l'oggetto specifico del volume, siano stati al centro dell'attenzione filologica e critica di Giorgio Varanini, che a essi dedicò larga parte delle sue forze e delle sue ricerche: e qui basti ricordare i quattro volumi olschkiani delle *Laudi cortonesi* — insieme con L. Banfi e A. Cerruti Burgio — che sono certamente un punto di riferimento per qualità filologica e comunque esito di una lunga fedeltà che va dalla edizione laterziana dei *Cantari religiosi senesi del '300*; e vogliamo aggiungere solo un breve cenno agli studi danteschi: frequenti e definitive puntualizzazioni nelle *lecturae*, alcune delle quali si raccolgono ne *L'accesso strale*. Proprio la qualità filologica condiziona, ed il termine abbia l'accezione più vasta e benevola, un po' tutti gli interventi: tal che l'insieme appare tributo e in qualche modo consenso e testimonianza di un gruppo d'importanti studiosi a un filologo e al suo rigore metodologico.

*In limine* Alfredo Stussi pubblica, in una dimensione filologicamente sontuosa, sette documenti in dialetto veronese cui Giorgio Varanini contava di dedicare le sue attenzioni. Si tratta dei "più antichi documenti del veronese", se si fa eccezione delle annotazioni del 1205, importanti perché "offrono nuove prove del fatto che quel volgare medievale in parte gravitava [...] verso la Lombardia orientale". M. L. Doglio offre uno studio su Angela da Foligno, una delle figure più interessanti della mistica duecentesca, della quale occorrerebbe tenere maggiormente in conto l'influenza sul *background* culturale al quale attinsero i poeti del Dolce Stil Nuovo, Dante (e pensiamo all'incontro di Angela con Ubertino da Casale), e così via — cfr. qui stesso il saggio di B. Martinelli, p. 520 —. Il *Libro dell'esperienza* inaugura "un nuovo genere letterario, quello delle rivelazioni". È rilevante che l'incontro di Angela con Dio avvenga nei termini e nelle prerogative femminili, ma avvenga soprattutto in chiave 'sensibile' delle sensazioni fisiche, delle percezioni olfattive, che consegnano alla cultura duecentesca i "significati simbolici e i modelli letterari consolidati lungo l'arco dal *Cantico dei Cantici* a Dionigi l'Areopagita".

E. Taddeo torna sul tema 'tempo' che era stato oggetto di una sua ricerca in Petrarca. Ora l'analisi si volge a storicizzare il discorso: ed in particolare s'appunta su Guido Cavalcanti, nel quale — il critico avverte preliminarmente — sono assenti "tanto un vero 'sentimento del tempo' [...] quanto quella poetica della memoria, che è essenziale in Petrarca". Tuttavia "si ha l'impressione" che col maturarsi dell'esperienza poetica Cavalcanti approdi a una policonia che nel sonetto XXXVIII sortisce al tema della 'rimembranza'. Probabilmente andava maggiormente marcato come i sonetti XXXVI, XXXVIII, XLI — quelli in cui il Taddeo evidenzia una maggiore

mobilità temporale — nascono nella precisa esperienza biografica e letteraria di un più stretto sodalizio con Dante, che del “libro della memoria” s'è fatto o si sta facendo scriba insieme col Cavalcanti. Nella vicenda poetica di quel sodalizio gli esiti dello studio del Taddeo possono essere suscettibili di proficuo dibattito quando affermano che “alcune prove sanno mobilitare gli strumenti della temporalità fino a esiti estremamente significativi. Questi componimenti (o almeno i seguenti: XXX, XXXIV, XXXV, XXXVI, XXXVIII, XLI) appartengono con ogni verosimiglianza alla fase più avanzata del breve canzoniere”. Il che spingerebbe a far concludere con sodale contemporaneità le esperienze stilnovistiche cavalcantiana e dantesca alla data della composizione della *Vita nuova*, la cui scrittura a quattro mani acquisterebbe nuovi sensi e nuovi echi.

Con grande raffinatezza e misura G. Di Pino cerca le ragioni della poesia di personaggi ‘non-protagonisti’ della *Commedia* dantesca, e ne riconosce l'autonoma grandezza. I ‘non-protagonisti’ non sono funzionalizzati ai ‘protagonisti’, hanno vita poetica propria, e nelle alternanze dei ritmi costruiscono la poesia del poema. Al quale è dedicato nella raccolta in memoria di G. Varanini un nutrito gruppo di studi, naturalmente tra loro diseguali, ma che nell'insieme costituiscono uno splendido tributo all'attività dantologica dello studioso. Un interesse tutto speciale suscita il lavoro di P. Baldan che propone una interpretazione, per vero non nuovissima nella sostanza, ma originale nel percorso seguito, dei versi danteschi che alludono al “veltro”. Ebbene quei versi si adatterebbero alla ‘carta bombicina’, che “cambiava un intero panorama fisico e mentale”. Su quella ‘carta’ il Poeta avrebbe vergato il suo poema: “Ora non è chi non veda come al ‘sacrato poema’ ottimamente si addicano queste altissime qualità che riconducono a una ispirazione divina [...] E non occorrerebbe certo un grande sforzo, a questo punto, per riverberare sul supporto cartaceo, sempre premendo sul pedale metaforico-metonymico, un simile assoluto stato di grazia”.

Definitivo l'apporto di Giorgio Brugnoli che indica alla base di *Inf.* XXVI, 97-98, il ri-uso dei versi 785-793 e 796-802 del I libro dell'*Achilleide* di Stazio “in una specie di contrappasso: Ulisse che aveva allettato dolosamente Achille a *ardere* per la *cupiditas* di *visere gentes innumeras* e che l'aveva incitato a *exercere* la sua *virtus*, è ora punito per il suo stesso *ardore* a *divenir del mondo esperto e del valore* [...]”. Dopo la dignitosa *Introduzione al prepurgatorio* di Antonio Illiano ed una lettura del VI del *Purgatorio* della Picchio Simonelli, P. M. Sipala offre una informatissima, e gradevole, lettura del XII, sempre del *Purgatorio*, nel quale vien rilevata la sapiente e ritmica mescolanza di scene mitologiche, bibliche e terrene. Generoso il contributo che Aldo Vallone porge con la lettura del canto XIV del *Purgatorio*: è un viaggio nella lingua e nella cultura di Dante attraverso una fitta serie di riferimenti linguistici culturali e argomentativi, vuoi all'interno del poema stesso, vuoi a quello che qui viene addotto come il modello del canto: l'*Apocalisse*. Conta che nella *lectura* del canto la memoria del dato culturale venga magistralmente dal Vallone colta nell'atto stesso del farsi esperimento ed esperienza poetica. Tal che la generosità erudita non dissecca, anzi, nutre e permea la poesia dantesca.

Francesco Tateo legge il XIX canto *Purgatorio* al centro di un vero e proprio "sistema". Il sogno in esso contenuto lo collega al IX e al XXVII. E i tre luoghi segnano il confine tra tre diverse zone della montagna. "Ma nell'incontro con papa Adriano il XIX richiama anche [...] la scena infernale del corrispondente canto XIX [...]: la simonia è anch'essa, nella dimensione infernale, una forma di avidità di potere [...]. Non è possibile che Dante non abbia inteso riprendere questo discorso nel XIX del *Paradiso*, dove l'Aquila, che rappresenta il giusto potere temporale, condanna una serie di principi cristiani venuti meno al loro ruolo". Con buona intuizione M. Picone (*'Auctoritas' classica e salvezza cristiana: una lettura tipologica di 'Purgatorio' XXII*) afferma che la salvezza cristiana di Stazio serve a sviluppare una polemica di natura squisitamente letteraria: "La salvezza di Stazio diventa [...] un modo per fissarne la posizione nella gerarchia dei valori poetici". Non è chiara, però, poi l'affermazione secondo la quale quella cristianizzazione sarebbe "un modo soprattutto per affermare la superiorità della letteratura di ispirazione cristiana su quella di ispirazione pagana": poco chiara perché in nessun luogo Dante esplicita o sottintende la superiorità poetica di Stazio su Virgilio. Se poi il Picone intende la superiorità della poesia dantesca sulla virgiliana allora altri percorsi dimostrativi servono, ed anzi Stazio può essere solo parzialmente utile all'argomentazione. Così come poco utile all'argomentazione è la ricerca di una sia pur virgolettata fonte nel *De Vetula* pseudo-ovidiano. Più probabilmente a Dante era più che sufficiente la propria capacità inventiva; e soprattutto era più pratica che non la sostituzione di Stazio a Ovidio. E ciò tanto più in quanto la narrazione latina e quella dantesca si modulano su un *ordo naturalis* delle 'conversioni' ("dispersione mondana", "crisi", "conversione") che è di tutte le età, da quella di S. Francesco a quella propria di Dante, "mi ritrovai in una selva oscura", sino alla personale di Alessandro Manzoni: *artificialis* è l'*ordo* della conversione 'inventata' di fra' Cristoforo.

Enzo Noè Girardi, nella bella lettura del XV del *Paradiso*, ribadisce l'ortodossia dantesca: "dacché Dante ha capito il senso vero della sua vocazione, che non è di filosofo in senso stretto, né di mero volgarizzatore della cultura; ma di poeta: ora cessa ogni possibilità di equivocare sul senso della laicità di Dante, che qui appare del tutto interna alla ortodossia e alla storia della Chiesa vivente". Per vero non ci risulta che dai sostenitori della 'laicità' sia mai stato affermato nulla di contrario, e che anche dai sostenitori più accesi dell' 'avverroismo' dantesco si è sempre affermato che il Poeta è il poeta della cristianità e del cristianesimo e che la *Commedia* è ricostruzione in un *unum* del cielo e della terra, della Chiesa e dell'Impero. Ci lasciano in qualche modo perplessi la contrapposizione operata dal Girardi tra filosofo e poeta — contrapposizione che certo Dante non avverte — e la de-ideologizzazione del poeta: "Che poi Dante non abbia qui da offrire altra immagine concreta di una cristianità rinnovata che quella che gli è suggerita dalla nostalgia per la Firenze antica e per le più semplici forme di vita della prima età comunale: questo è appunto il segno tipico della natura poetica, non ideologica o visionaria del suo messaggio: poiché il poeta, sia Dante sia Leopardi, non può rappresentare il futuro che con le immagini del passato". Definitiva ci appare invece la conclusione secondo la quale Dante avrebbe



costruito Cacciaguida “anche col proprio ideale di laico cristiano, e con la propria esperienza di cittadino e di padre di famiglia, che ha scelto di lasciare per sempre la sua città e in essa ogni cosa diletta più caramente per rispondere ad una chiamata”

Dotte e feconde di suggestioni le *Giunte a una lettura esemplare di Buffalmacco nel Camposanto di Pisa* di Marcello Ciccuto. Il quale coglie in filigrana la presenza della predicazione del Cavalcanti che nella predicazione contro la “vana apparenza” della *Disciplina degli spirituali* sembra offrire il nucleo concettuale dell'evento figurativo. Conta la ricostruzione del processo per il quale le parole della predicazione si fanno illustrazioni e queste si servono delle parole e delle rime in un sistema nel quale nessuna espressione culturale si isola, e nel quale perciò ogni semplificazione è impoverimento. Tuttavia, e il lavoro del Ciccuto alla fin fine questo significa, a nulla vale l'ipotesi della globalità della cultura duo-trecentesca, quando non sia supportata dal verifica filologica.

Giancarlo Breschi in perfetta sintonia con il tributo d'onore presenta *Una pergamena superstite di un laudario fiorentino*. La pergamena conserva due laude per Santa Maria Maddalena già conosciute nel laudario della Compagnia di Sant'Egidio, pubblicato da Concetto Del Popolo nella collana di laudari diretta da Giorgio Varanini. Così pure E. Cappelletti offre un esemplare saggio che realizza, o avvia alla realizzazione, un progetto dello scomparso: *Alcuni statuti di Disciplinati (Confraternita dei SS. Simone e Taddeo di Firenze e di S. Croce in Borgo San Sepolcro)*. La descrizione dei manoscritti, gli *excerpta*, i cenni storici sulle compagnie rendono augurabile l'edizione completa di questi statuti e di tutti gli altri che attendono d'essere studiati.

Assai sofisticato è il saggio offerto da Emilio Pasquini: *Dal 'plazer' stilnovistico-cortese a quello umanistico-cristiano: storia di un verso-chiave sulla neve*. E il verso-chiave sulla neve è quello famoso cavalcantiano di *Biltà di donna* “bianca neve scender senza venti” del quale lo studioso vuole ricostruire l'intero, coerente, sistema che da Cavalcanti, appunto, e prima di lui dalla poesia provenzale, porta il *topos* sino a Petrarca attraverso Dante. Già U. Bosco aveva supposto che quando Cavalcanti l'assume quell'immagine era già ‘tradizionale’: infatti essa ricorre in una rima di Francesco Ismera — segnalato dal Calcaterra — che primo se ne appropriava nell'ambito del genere dei *plazer*. La scarsità delle attestazioni del bello della neve si spiega assai facilmente perché il genere del *plazer* è legato alla tipologia primaverile. Più larga è l'attestazione transalpina, continua il Pasquini, e assai interessante appare quella di Bernart de Tot-lo-mon la cui *Be m'agrada-l temps de pascor* presenta “singolari” isotopie con l'Ismera e con *Biltà di donna*. Ha ragione il Pasquini quando afferma che non è importante stabilire che sia stato l'Ismera ad introdurre la variante ‘neve’ nel genere del *plazer* primaverile: certo è che a Dante doveva parere autore l'amico Guido. Anzi di quel *Biltà di donna* riecheggiava gli “adorni legni in mar forte correnti” proprio in quel “celebre e non meno innovativo” *Guido, i' vorrei*. Al sonetto dantesco Cavalcanti notoriamente rispose con un rifiuto *S'io fossi quello che d'amor fu degno*, che fu risposta aspra, da tutti spiegata con l'umore splenetico di Guido. Il Pasquini vi rinviene l'accusa a Dante di non aver

tenuto conto del suo stato d'animo che avrebbe dovuto essergli ben noto; "ma l'amarezza della diagnosi non impedisce al Cavalcanti una più sottile e acida ritorsione: con quel 'siffatto legno' contrapposto al 'vasel' dantesco, egli sembra voler ribadire i suoi diritti di precedenza in fatto di navigazioni idilliche". Il che avrebbe innescato una polemica letteraria che, affiorando nella petrosa *Io son venuto al punto de la rota*, esploderà (quando, ed è una considerazione di chi scrive, ormai l'esperienza del Dolce Stil Nuovo è esaurita, Guido è morto e la partita con lui è stata, con misteriosa eleganza, chiusa, se il termine è quello giusto, nel X canto, senza contare il successivo, ma certo non polemico, "l'uno a l'altro Guido" di *Purg.* XI, 97-99) in *Inferno* XIV, 30 per il quale "non sarà forse arbitrario pensare a una vendetta sottile per l'antico sgarbo di chi aveva rifiutato l'invito cortese di *Guido, i' vorrei*". Il momento in cui la storia, o il sistema, del *topos* sembra mostrare qualche limite è quando si propone come risoltrice di uno dei più vecchi problemi d'interpretazione dell'*Inferno*, quello legato ai vv. 1-15 del XXIV, i versi del 'villanello' così distanti dall'atmosfera di Malebolge in cui si muovono i due poeti. Il 'problema' di quel passo è, notoriamente, quello d'apparire appunto come una digressione letteraria, irrelata rispetto al contesto del/dei canti. Né lo risolve la lettura del Pasquini: "Nella ferrea economia dantesca, l'apparente digressione si giustifica soltanto come ironica ma sorridente ripresa del *plazer* cavalcantiano". Altrove chi scrive ha sottolineato la natura letteraria di quel passo: ma ha anche evidenziato la funzione che la letterarietà in sé ha nel canto di Vanni Fucci. Nel *Trionfo della morte* Petrarca offre "il nuovo e decisivo contromodello, non senza una strategia allusiva ancor più complessa di quella dantesca verso Cavalcanti: la polemica [...] è rivolta sì al XIV dell'*Inferno*, ma coinvolge anche Cavalcanti e perfino Ismera. Alla 'morte seconda' dei dannati nell'*Inferno*" si contrappone "la *tertia mors* [...], morte—vita o 'morte bella' di Laura".

F. J. Jones riesamina la annosa questione, irrisolvibile, della identificazione di Laure de Sade con la Laura cantata da Petrarca. Attendibile sarebbe la testimonianza dell'Abate de Sade che primo studiò il caso, falso invece il rinvenimento della tomba. Aspettiamo che altri e nuovi documenti rendano utile il lavoro di Jones. Dopo la garbata lettura del petrarchesco *Passa la nave mia* di G. A. Camerino, B. Martinelli conduce l'analisi di *Standomi un giorno solo a la fenestra*, la CCCXXIII del *Canzoniere*. Il Martinelli si muove su più fronti: da quello filologico-testuale a quello storico a quello filosofico. L'esame dell'abbozzo contenuto in Vat. Lat. 3196 gli permette di cogliere non solo la genesi, ma la struttura stessa della canzone, le sue simmetrie, i chiasmi concettuali, infine, di cui si compone. Tal che l'impianto della canzone risulta essere di tipo esameronale, nel quale Petrarca poteva inquadrare la teoria delle sei età del mondo. Di qui prima la lettura dei simboli contenuti nella canzone, poi il confronto col *background* e col bagaglio culturale nei quali è possibile rinvenire isotipie nel genere delle visioni. Mai isotipie sono rinvenibili nella biografia stessa del poeta. Bene, da tutte queste Petrarca poteva maturare l'idea di "sintetizzare, per *exempla*, [...] l'immagine molteplice e mutevole dell'universo terreno, appeso al filo della precarietà temporale, soggetto alle legge costante del

movimento e del mutamento, in se stesso instabile e caduco". L'argomento era stato largamente svolto dalla letteratura latina medievale profana e non. Ed era stato svolto, ovviamente, anche nel genere delle visioni, entro il quale poi specifiche erano delle visioni dalla finestra. All'interno della storia di questo *topos* più larghe e consonanti sono le isotipie col *De vanitate mundi* di Ugo da San Vittore: le analogie tra il testo di Ugo di San Vittore e la canzone petrarchesca sono indiscutibili e riguardano non solo la stanza della nave, ma l'impianto stesso della canzone". Forse bisognava spiegare all'interno del *Canzoniere* del persistere di un testo di oltre duecento anni — Ugo notoriamente morì nel 1140 circa e la canzone è del 13 ottobre 1368 — se non si voleva che un lavoro per molti versi esemplare poi approdasse a conclusioni in qualche modo contraddittorie dei metodi perseguiti: "L'originalità del Petrarca rifugge maggiormente per il disegno delle scene, per la coerenza e la compattezza degli elementi narrativi [...]".

Complementari nella loro diversità di metodi e di fini i due saggi dedicati da G. Barberi Squarotti e da B. Porcelli a Boccaccio: rispettivamente *Visione e ritrattazione: il "Corbaccio" e Il "Corbaccio". Per un'interpretazione dell'opera e del titolo*. Il Barberi Squarotti insiste sul "fondamentale carattere metaletterario dell'opera, che il Boccaccio gioca su diversi piani". Centrale è il capovolgimento dell'impostazione di poetica del prologo del *Decameron* [...] Alla scrittura della lode il Boccaccio sostituisce quella del biasimo. Il *Corbaccio* è anche una *Vita nuova* rovesciata". Ma è addirittura la nozione stessa di letteratura che Boccaccio metterebbe in crisi: "quello che è uno dei modi tipici dell'innamoramento della letteratura cortese è rivelato nella sua fallacia [...] Dietro le parole ci può essere una realtà totalmente opposta". Se il Barberi Squarotti ha esaminato il romanzo boccacciano nella sua struttura narrativa, Bruno Porcelli ne esamina i parametri storici, biografici e culturali. E primo tra problemi viene affrontato quello del titolo, su cui filologi e storici si sono a lungo soffermati senza giungere a una soluzione soddisfacente: negli ultimi anni va prevalendo la derivazione da *corvo* nell'accezione che i bestiari e la favolistica medievale attribuivano all'uccello, o di nero uccellaccio in figura d'amore. Il Porcelli ricorda come sia attestato "per i primi del Trecento il latino *corbacium*, [...] ed è dunque ipotizzabile che esistesse nell'uso anche l'equivalente volgare sinora non apparso in altre testimonianze coeve, ma riemergente, nel senso specifico di contenitore di letame, in un testo seriore". Tal che "la vedova del Boccaccio è un disgustoso contenitore di materia ignobile: un sacco di m. diremmo con consueta metafora moderna, un corbaccio o cestone di letame, diceva con metafora nuova il Boccaccio". Il ritratto che della vedova fa lo scrittore è quello di un'anti—Vergine: essa è appunto vedova, e due volte, di costumi corrotti: e se è così allora le si addiranno l'opposto di quegli appellativi che alla Vergine, ed alle vergini, si usava dare: *archa legis*, *archa d'umiltate*, *concha margaritifera* e ancora, *vas*, *vaso*, *vasello*. L'opposto di simili contenitore è appunto *corbaccio*. Al Porcelli non pare necessario supporre una reale disavventura amorosa: "Il proposito di dare alla propria vicenda poetica una conclusione analoga a quella dantesca induce il Boccaccio a sfruttare il pretesto — reale o fittizio che sia — di una particolare caduta o smarrimento, da cui



occorre trarsi fuori con l'aiuto di una guida esperta del percorso da compiere". Vittorio Zaccaria esplicita — *Il genio narrativo nelle opere latine del Boccaccio* — con grande misura critica quello che è certamente un giudizio scontato: Boccaccio è narratore, sempre: anche nelle opere latine. Il problema — se è problema: è semmai necessità — è verificare nel concreto i luoghi dell'arte e gli spessori estetici. Tal che lo scontato aprioristico divenga dato provato, e soprattutto non esagerato né in sopravvalutazioni né in sottovalutazioni rispetto all'inevitabile parametro di confronto costituito dal *Decameron*.

L. Battaglia Ricci torna sull'analisi del codice Ashburnhamiano 574 della Laurenziana, il *Libro delle rime di F. Sacchetti*: questa volta nella prospettiva di evidenziare, attraverso i modi ed i tempi della scrittura, gli intenti e i fini di questo zibaldone. È chiaro, afferma la Battaglia Ricci, che "grosse differenze corrono tra la prima e la seconda parte: nella prima parte è registrato un canzoniere più convenzionalmente atteggiato, anche dal punto di vista grafico". nella seconda parte si fa spazio la "scrittura continua che dissolve anche le convenzioni grafiche del canzoniere iniziale: a differenza di quanto si verificava nella parte iniziale, i testi, siano essi lettere o composizioni in versi, possono qui iniziare a metà carta e continuare nella carta seguente, quasi senza soluzione di continuità". La conclusione è indubbiamente suggestiva: "per uno scrittore come Sacchetti, che perfino nel redigere un libro di novelle si era misurato criticamente con la già imperativa codificazione del genere novelliere elaborata da Boccaccio, rivelandosi scrittore capace di scelte esteticamente valide, il fatto che il libro delle rime si presenti come un 'anticanzoniere' potrebbe anche voler dire che l'autore ha elaborato [...] un progetto diverso di canzoniere, ricorrendo, magari, a modelli formali meno prevedibili".

Commosso, oltre che di non poco rilievo, è il tributo che C. Del Popolo offre, "*Rigore*" e gli "*Statuti del Baracane*". Due ricordi di G. Varanini. Con la consueta maestria G.B. Pellegrini si occupa della lingua della *Cronica de la guerra da Veneciani a Zenovesi* di Daniele di Chinazzo, pubblicata nel 1958 da V. Lazzarini. Non ostante l'origine trevigiana anche Daniele si serve di una "lingua veneta "illustre" che si differenziava non tanto per qualche tratto municipale, ma piuttosto per una più o meno marcata tendenza nell'accogliere forme genericamente settentrionali di ampia diffusione e spesso già toscane". Di suo il Chinazzo ha una "sensibile tendenza alla perdita del vocalismo finale".

Vittore Branca pubblica, sia pur in maniera "provvisoria", un'inedita 'schermaglia', che, secondo una lettera riportata in nota, anche a G. Varanini, pareva "attribuibile" a Andrea da Barberino ("Andrea da Barberino [...] è un candidato più che possibile alla paternità delle stanze"). Essa è contenuta in due codici, il Laurenziano XC sup 103 (L) ed il Ginori—Conti 141 ora alla Morgan Library di New York. Si tratta della descrizione di un avvenimento agonistico, una 'schermaglia' appunto, che ha luogo in Piazza della Signoria il 13 gennaio del 1419. Al centro della vicenda agonistica sta il notaio Bartolomeo da Coiano — che risulta largamente ricordato nei volumi dell'Archivio di Stato di Firenze. In una continua reminiscenza classica ser Bartolomeo affronta dapprima un tal Pagolo e, poi un agguerritissimo avversario,

Raimondo di Spagna. I duelli si succedono rapidamente e alla fine Bartolomeo, per il quale la 'schermaglia' è stata composta, esce con pieni onori non essendo stata mai colpita: "ch'uscì del campo di percosse netto / qual niun altro non fé".

G. Biancardi — *Esperimenti metrici del primo Quattrocento* — affronta un problema assai complesso com'è quello suscitato dal polimetro di Giusto de' Conti *La notte torna*; questa composizione suscitò particolare interesse presso i napoletani che videro in esso "un eccezionale esempio di sperimentalismo metrico [...] Endecasillabi, in parte frottolati, settenari e quinari, venivano alternandosi in successioni del tutto inusitate". Di qui la necessità di un'edizione più accurata e di una valutazione più esatta delle scelte metriche operate. È questo che il Biancardi cerca di fare confrontando *La notte torna* con un altro polimetro, *Pastori, o voi che havete in man la verga*, di Francesco Palmario, e rivelando nell'uno e nell'altro una chiave politica di lettura.

Arricchisce la già ricca messe degli inediti un grazioso e prezioso contrasto dei mesi edito da uno stretto collaboratore di Giorgio Varanini, Luigi Banfi. La religione del lavoro che fu propria del Medioevo, ha trovato larga espressione artistica nelle sculture a destinazione sacra e profana. Più rare le testimonianze letterarie: due quelle sinora conosciute; tre con questa pubblicata dal Banfi dal man. Cassaf. 3.3 della Biblioteca Angelo Mai di Bergamo. Non tutto è chiaro nei versi bergamaschi del contrasto: qualcosa è andato irrimediabilmente perduto: "uno degli elementi più difficili per l'interpretazione di questi testi è la possibilità di collocarli in un contesto preciso, sia storico che ambientale".

Dopo l'intenso saggio di C.M. Sanfilippo, *'Vaspergolo', nota di toponomastica ferrarese*, un'altra stretta collaboratrice di G. Varanini, Anna Ceruti Burgio, propone *Due componimenti quattrocenteschi inediti dedicati alla Vergine*. Tali componimenti sono contenuti nel manoscritto, Reg. F. 179 della Biblioteca Comunale di Reggio Emilia, ancora in gran parte inedito, contenente le rime di Andrea Baiardi, un petrarchista non genialissimo, ma neppure da lasciare nell'oblio: "Se cercassimo in queste poesie l'intima e sincera adesione [...] o la profonda devozione di un Belcari o di un Castellani, resteranno delusi; piuttosto, la loro lettura offre qualche spunto per osservazioni di costume". Ed intanto sono testimoni della diffusione della cultura laudistica, ma anche della scontata dimensione petrarchesca e della meno scontata derivazione dalla preghiera alla Vergine dell'ultimo canto del *Paradiso* dantesco.

Ricca e varia fu la fortuna del *Buovo d'Antona*: tra le altre attestazioni D. Delcorno Branca si sofferma su due edizioni bolognesi, una del 1480 ed una del 1497. La seconda edizione in 22 cantari "è in larga misura toscano, sia pure con alcune vistose chiazze linguistiche padane". Esiste un rifacitore del *Buovo 1480* e come ebbe a lavorare?: una sicura via alla soluzione di questi problemi viene offerta dalla Delcorno Branca che individua nel ms. 483 della Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze, un *Buovo* toscano in ottave "che si rivela subito come un'ampia sezione del testo pubblicato a Bologna nel 1497"; anzi si può concludere che "dietro la stampa del 1497" sta "un manipolatore che avrebbe sostituito al poema precedentemente stampato un nuovo testo [...] giuntandolo con un altro poema, tutto dedicato a guerre

contro gli infedeli, così da ottenere un prodotto di maggior successo".

Ultimo inedito di questo primo volume viene da M. Castoldi. Si tratta di un capitolo ternario d'argomento amoroso tratto dal Vat. Lat. 5153. Le lettere iniziali delle prime e delle ultime otto terzine formano il nome 'Lucrezia' e l'aggettivo 'mantuana'. Le sei terzine centrali danno 'Curada'. Ma l'amanuense è incerto, carica il tratto di altre lettere tal che, forse, si può leggere anche 'Alda': forse, continua il Castoldi, 'Curada' e 'Alda' sono schermo uno dell'altra. Ancora alla donna del cinquecento è dedicato il lavoro di R. Alhaique Pettinelli: alla donna un po' astratta e tipizzata, senza indugio su quei contesti culturali dei quali altrove la studiosa è stata generosa.

Una precisa e definitoria esposizione dello *status quaestionis* sui *Cinque canti* è offerta da Alberto Casadei. Si tratta di un'anticipazione di quanto sarà trattato con maggiore ampiezza di argomentazioni in un volume di imminente pubblicazione. In generale si possono condividere quasi tutte le tesi esposte, ma bisognerà attendere per una più documentata discussione.

Walter Meliga infine torna ad una delle tematiche più care al Varanini presentando il ms. 34 della Biblioteca Carducciana di Bologna che riproduce con grande fedeltà — ma con l'aggiunta di tre testi, di cui uno in latino — il laudario ligure proveniente da Finalmarina ed appartenuto alla Confraternita dei Battuti di San Giovanni Battista.

Dunque un'offerta degna del destinatario, come si vede dal nostro breve resoconto, i cui sommessi rilievi vogliono essere segno dell'interesse che i singoli contributi e il loro insieme suscitano.

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**Rinaldina Russell, ed. *Italian Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994.**

Non sono "femministe arrabbiate" le studiose che hanno contribuito al volume *Italian Women Writers: A Bio-Biographical Sourcebook* curato da Rinaldina Russell, bensì donne e uomini di cultura (fra il numero dei collaboratori si annoverano anche alcuni rappresentanti maschili) determinati a dare il giusto risalto a scrittrici della letteratura italiana che per lungo tempo sono rimaste "silenziose". A dire il vero iniziative di questo genere, ossia enciclopedie, dizionari o opere antologiche dedicate interamente a donne, non fanno ancora parte della consuetudine editoriale italiana, salvo sporadici esempi. E a guardar bene sembra che il maggior impulso verso il "recupero" della letteratura femminile italiana venga d'oltreoceano e sia spesso frutto di seminari organizzati nei dipartimenti di *Women's Studies*.

Rinaldina Russell, che nel 1990 e successivamente nel 1991 aveva contribuito



rispettivamente ai volumi intitolati *Women's Studies Encyclopedia* e *An Encyclopedia of World Literature of Continental Women Writers*, si è ora impegnata nella raccolta e nella revisione di saggi monografici su 51 scrittrici italiane dal XIV secolo fino ai giorni nostri. In alcuni casi questi saggi sono vere e proprie indagini pionieristiche in quanto rappresentano il primo tentativo di dare una visione completa dell'opera della scrittrice presa in considerazione. Disposti in ordine alfabetico, come si addice ad un testo di consultazione, i saggi spaziano dalla figura alquanto romantica di Vittoria Aganoor Pompilj a colei che per qualche tempo fu la musa ispiratrice di alcune composizioni liriche di Giosuè Carducci, Annie Vivanti. Sfogliando *Italian Women Writers* troviamo, tra le tante scrittrici, Sibilla Aleramo, celebre, fra l'altro, per la sua travagliata vita amorosa che l'avvicina ad un D'Annunzio al femminile e autrice di *Una donna*, considerato dalla critica italiana il primo romanzo femminista. Poco oltre incontriamo Caterina di Benincasa, ossia Caterina da Siena, la santa che riesce a conciliare attività politica con straordinarie esperienze mistiche.

Ovviamente non tutte le autrici italiane sono incluse, in quanto è stato necessario operare una selezione basata soprattutto sulla rappresentatività di ogni periodo letterario. Balza immediatamente all'occhio l'assenza di alcune autrici quale Compiuta Donzella, che, nonostante sia presumibilmente vissuta nel cinquantennio precedente al secolo in cui viene fatta iniziare la raccolta, è pur sempre la donna che per prima nel Medioevo ha scritto con fini letterari; fra le autrici contemporanee invece si avverte la mancanza di Oriana Fallaci, scrittrice che è riuscita a creare uno stile personale ispirandosi al proprio lavoro di giornalista e che ha avuto notevole successo soprattutto negli anni '70.

Ogni saggio, la cui estensione varia dalle sei alle nove cartelle, si compone rigorosamente di quattro sezioni — *biography*, *major themes*, *survey of criticism* e *bibliography* — molto ben elaborate ed esposte. Tutta l'opera è caratterizzata da uno stile scorrevole e disinvolto a tal punto che il lettore che ha familiarità con la forma spesso arida e impersonale di tante enciclopedie si meraviglierà nel trovarsi piacevolmente coinvolto dall'avvincente esposizione di interessanti biografie o dalla stimolante discussione di tematiche affascinanti. Anche la parte riguardante la rassegna critica è di notevole interesse, permettendo infatti di accedere speditamente ai nomi dei critici ed alle date che hanno contrassegnato i diversi stadi nell'interpretazione dell'opera di ogni singola autrice. La sezione bibliografica è particolarmente ben strutturata, offrendo in primo luogo le opere dell'autrice nella loro prima edizione; per il lettore anglofono vengono inoltre segnalati i lavori reperibili in lingua inglese; fonte di preziose e aggiornate informazioni è, infine, l'elenco dei saggi di critica, monografici e non, dedicati all'autrice.

Data l'impostazione enciclopedica dei saggi, la prospettiva storica in cui si colloca ogni autrice viene in qualche modo a sfumare. La curatrice, Rinaldina Russel, sopperisce a tale carenza con un'ampia introduzione in cui offre un esauriente inquadramento delle scrittrici, inserite nel contesto culturale e ambientale nel quale agirono. La curatrice del volume, infatti, si premura anche di far riferimento a

scrittrici non incluse nei saggi, a cominciare dalla capostipite della letteratura femminile italiana fino al profluvio di autrici contemporanee. Chiarificatori inoltre i riferimenti ad alcuni rappresentanti maschili di fondamentale importanza nella storia della cultura letteraria italiana.

Molti si sono chiesti se valga la pena considerare la letteratura femminile come categoria a se stante, obiettando che separare la letteratura femminile da quella maschile significherebbe in un certo qual modo ghettizzarla ed emarginarla. Il fine tuttavia di varie opere apparse negli ultimi anni negli Stati Uniti (e altrove) rivolte esclusivamente a studi di autrici è quello di far conoscere queste donne ad un pubblico più o meno specializzato che possa solidarizzare con loro e con il loro passato di isolamento e di esclusione. Anche in Italia si è avvertita l'emarginazione delle scrittrici. In un numero della rivista "Minerva" di qualche anno fa, interamente dedicato ad una rassegna di contributi di donne italiane al mondo delle lettere, si metteva in evidenza come le informazioni riguardanti scrittrici fossero di difficile accesso: "Le donne autrici sono presenti nella letteratura italiana ma individuarle richiede un paziente lavoro di ricerca. Gli storici letterari le dimenticano o le subordinano o comunque non danno loro il rilievo che meritano. Chi le ricerca deve amplificare segnali deboli, seguire indizi, sfogliare vecchie carte inesplorate per recuperare qualche tesoro nascosto" (5.4 [1988]). Ben vengano quindi tutte le opere che facilitano la ricerca in tale campo.

*Italian Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook* agevolerà il lavoro di molte ricercatrici e anche di ricercatori in quanto, oltre a contenere esaurienti saggi monografici, fornisce fondamentali bibliografie aggiornate. La ricerca è ulteriormente facilitata da un Indice che riporta tutti gli autori e titoli di opere che sono stati menzionati e anche riferimenti alle tematiche più ricorrenti. Come informa la Russel nella prefazione, il lavoro non è rivolto solo a specialisti, ma intende anche essere un'opera divulgativa. Non resta che sperare che anche in Italia si produca presto un lavoro di altrettanto agevole consultazione e di tale rilevanza nello studio della letteratura femminile.

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**Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum. *Black Madonnas. Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy*. Boston: U of Northwestern P, 1993. Pp. 273.**

*Black Madonnas* builds on the conclusion of Birnbaum's previous book, *Liberazione della donna. Feminism in Italy* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1986): "No existing socialism has been able to translate Marxist philosophy into a society that is libertarian and genuinely equalitarian. In Italy where traces persist of the ancient Mediterranean earth mother who nurtured diverse people and a multiplicity of beliefs, where pluralism mixes beliefs of unedited gospel with an unedited Marxism and

feminists laugh as well as rage, the vision is as real as the dark wheat and red poppies of Sicily" (293). *Black Madonnas* is an excursion in time as well as in space in search of the traces of the ancient earth mother and of the role she has played in Italian religion, politics, literature, art, and economics. Black madonna functions as "a metaphor for a memory of the time when the earth was believed to be the body of woman and all creatures were equal" (3). As an antithesis of the official church's white madonna, the black madonna stands for the marginal, the suppressed, the vernacular elements of the Italian society. Despite the attempts to whiten her image and thus subjugate her to the official doctrine of the ruling classes, the survival of the black madonna and her resurgence under numerous guises in the folk beliefs, myths, stories, and rituals testifies to the resistance of "the denied cultures" against the domination of the hegemonic culture. The goal of Birnbaum's fascinating study is twofold: to provide a history of that survival and to demonstrate its close links with the ongoing fight of Italian feminists and democratic socialists to construct a non-violent, environmentally safe society which promotes "liberty, equality and justice" (191) while respecting "individualization and difference" (192).

In chapters I and II the author lays out the theoretical premises for her study. She gives a perceptive and well-balanced overview of the theories of Italian folklore in the works of Antonio Gramsci, Carlo Ginzburg, Robert Bellah, and Ernesto de Martino. Birnbaum emphasizes the complex relationship between the dominant and the suppressed cultures, and suggests that "vernacular beliefs, rituals, and festivals reveal degrees of absorption or assimilation, as well as degrees of resistance" (27). She relates the question of the submerged cultures to the recent anthropological and historical findings of the Italian historian Giorgio Galli and the American Lithuanian anthropologist, Marija Gimbutas. Both scholars in their well-documented studies claim that "neolithic agrarian cultures [of the central and Mediterranean Europe] were matrilineal, egalitarian, and peaceful" (29) until they were overcome by patriarchy. The traces of these cultures are revealed in the images of black madonnas (officially called Byzantine), to this day venerated mainly in Central Europe and Italy as incarnation of justice, freedom, and integrity.

Chapter III and IV are devoted to tracing multiple elements which converge in the image of earth as the people's nurturing mother. The Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, retold in Italy as the story of Ceres and Proserpina, have their origins in the Anatolian Magna Mater, Cybele, and the African goddess Isis. Sicily, suspended between two continents, and thus a site of cultural, political, religious, and artistic peregrinations, provides a wealth of information accessible through oral stories, rituals, and visual representations. The black madonnas near Palèrmo at Milicia, Tindari, and Trapani, the madonna Odigiatria (Sicily's protectress), the whitened black madonna of Chiaramonte Gulfi, and the island's most beloved saint, *santa Lucia*, all play the role of a strong mother who stands "at the center of the economic, social, and religious life of the peasant family" (50) and who heads the community of women consisting of "midwives, healers, witches, and official mourners." The continuity with the prechristian goddess is visible in the responsibility of women for



life, death, and regeneration (51). In contrast to the official church madonna, an embodiment of passivity and submission, the Sicilian madonna participates actively in the peasants' lives. In popular stories she rescues wives from bad husbands, wards off plagues and hunger, "effects miracles" and acts as "women's special advocate" (54). Birnbaum attributes the Sicilian spirit of independence and rebellion against oppression to "the themes of justice, class consciousness, vindication of the poor, and strategies of resistance" manifested in the folk stories of madonnas and saints (70).

Chapter V and VI relate the spirit of rebellion against official authority to the traditions of carnival with its implications of subverting the established order. The author discusses the origins of rituals occurring in many Italian carnivals: Naples, Ivrea, Bosses, Sicily, Sardenia, Viareggio, Putignano, and Arcireale. She presents a complex and at times confusing picture of the symbolism and meaning of carnival festivities, for instance, the opposition between "authentic" and "non-authentic" carnivals: "When carnivals are authentic, the lower class nature of the festival is apparent: peasant Rabelesian humor is omnipresent. . . . Class differences are apparent in the two festivals of Bagolino (Brescia), a 'gentlemen's carnival' and a carnival for the poor. In the poor people's carnival of Bagolino, there are no rules, all is spontaneous, and there is a great deal of erotic play" (86). But we never find out how "gentlemen's carnival" differs from the "authentic" one. As the author herself admits, carnival rituals often elude a spectator's interpretation: "More elusive is the meaning of the Sardinian carnival rite of men dressed in long black gowns, corsets, and shawls" (89).

The final chapters focus on the centrality of the madonna figure in the vernacular Sicilian celebrations linking it to "the beliefs in the prechristian woman divinity and her motherhood of equal human tribes" (143). Birnbaum connects these beliefs with the worship of the black madonnas of Siponto, Loreto, and Foggia who not only protect all outcasts, but also symbolize women's prophetic tradition. It begins with Miriam, the sister of Moses, and continues through sibyls who "according to christian interpreters prophesied the coming of Christ" and according to feminists were "peasant women who kept the memory and values of prechristian divinity" (109). The presence of sibyls in numerous churches (Loreto and Siena) points to the memory of the past, alive in stories extending beyond the church white madonna.

A colorful mosaic of folk stories, proverbs, rituals, myths, news, political manifestoes combined with descriptions of pictorial images, Birnbaum's thoroughly researched study crosses over the territories of history, religion, politics, feminism, art, and literature to illuminate hidden facets of a lesser goddess and, together with Micheal P. Carrol's *Madonnas that Maim* and Ida Magli's *La Madonna*, constitutes one of the major sources of information about the presence and significance of madonnas in Italy.

**David I. Kertzer and Richard P. Saller, eds. *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991. Pp. 399.**

The eighteen essays in this volume grow out of presentations made at a conference on "The Historical Roots of the Western Family: The Evolution of Family Relations in Italy," which took place at the Rockefeller Foundation's villa in Bellagio; they cover a broad variety of issues related to the Italian family from ancient Roman times to the present. Contributors comprise distinguished anthropologists, classicists, demographers, historians, rhetoricians, sociologists and professors of law from Canada, France, Great Britain, Italy and the United States. Topics explored in this interdisciplinary collection include "Child Rearing in Ancient Rome," "Kinship and Politics in Fourteenth-Century Florence," "The Development of Italian Adultery Law over Two Millennia," "Choosing a Spouse among Nineteenth-Century Central Italian Sharecroppers" and "Capital and Gendered Interest in Italian Family Firms."

The stated purpose of the volume is "to advance the study of European family life" (1). Italy was chosen as the focus for this study because of the sweeping influence it has exercised over the rest of Europe throughout the centuries and because it provides a continuum of sufficient data about family life from ancient times to the present. An additional factor that favored the choice of Italy as a suitable case study is that Italy represents a possible Mediterranean family system, which researchers may compare and contrast with the postulated Northern European family system, on the one hand, and with non-European societies, on the other.

Various methodologies have been applied in these interdisciplinary studies, which consequently add notable depth and richness to our comprehension of the origins and the evolution of the European family and its interaction with major institutions such as church and state. The resulting comparative analyses across two millennia contribute significantly to our understanding of deep social processes and of practices such as monogamy (as opposed to endogamy and exogamy), property transmission, etc. The study of the complex relation between ideology, norm and practice; the new interest among anthropologists in the study of symbols and symbolic systems; and a more nuanced appreciation of changing familial dynamics over the life of a family all constitute methodological approaches brought to these studies. Recent research in family history has also considered economic, demographic, institutional and ideological forces — in short, the social and cultural context within which families function and with which they interact; family size, roles played within the family, state and church intervention in and influence on family affairs (for example, the common practice in Catholic countries during some historical periods of encouraging or even forcing children to enter into the celibate religious life) are but a few examples cited of the impact of essentially external forces on the family. Gender studies have also deeply influenced the study of family history, especially, in this collection of essays, in the areas of the history of patriarchy, the

nature of the parent-child relationship and the concepts of family honor and female chastity. Interestingly, despite variations arising from differences of time and place, several contributors point out the pluricentenary existence in Italy of the concept of honor related to female chastity, a concept documented also in classical Rome and even in classical Greece.

This book is highly recommended as a useful resource to Italianists of all areas of specialization. It is fully annotated and contains a detailed bibliography of secondary literature, as well as an index of topics discussed, people and places. Printed in very small but easily legible type, this volume is a rich repository for literary and historical researchers wishing to acquire data on the Italian family of any period from the early Roman era to the present day.

V. Louise Katainen, *Auburn University*

**Franco Rella.** *Le soglie dell'ombra. Riflessioni sul mistero.* Milano: Feltrinelli, 1994. Pp. 168.

In this new book of connected essays and "rifrazioni," Rella reflects on the epistemology of tragedy in the dual contexts of its historical development in art and philosophy, and its psychological origins in the apprehension of mystery.

In Rella's account, mystery arises in us when a kind of epistemological shadow falls across the things that surround us. This shadow is the shadow of uncertainty, which Rella describes as a "tensione tra il sì e il no" (11) that makes alien the things with which we are (or we think we are) so intimate. Uncertainty broadens into tragic epistemology proper when it is realized that this tension will not allow itself to be resolved; for "è questa tensione, infatti, che costituisce la verità dell'uomo" (12). The central axiom of tragic epistemology, then, is that a certain undecidability is an unavoidable element pervading human knowledge of the world.

Rella locates the historical root of tragic epistemology in the philosophy of Anaximander. This Presocratic philosopher, as Rella shows, framed the question of being in terms of the notion of *apeiron*, or the indefinite, and gave rise to a paradoxical speculation holding that the being of determinate things was grounded in the indeterminacy of non-being (17). In light of Anaximander's paradox, Rella proclaims Heraclitus as Anaximander's inheritor, at least to the extent that Heraclitus elevated the notion of unreconcilable opposition into an overarching metaphysical principle (17). The Classical "età tragica" that these two philosophers initiate ends, according to Rella, with the symbolic destruction of reason in the Dionysian rituals embodied in Euripides' play *Bacchae*.

But if the historical epoch of tragedy's Classical age comes to an end, tragic epistemology does not. In tracing the afterlives of the presocratics' tragic insights, Rella argues that subsequent attempts to eliminate epistemological ambiguity,



epitomized by Plato's doctrine of the ideas, merely resulted in a monism rent by an intransigent contradiction between the transcendent and the mundane (65). For Rella, the lesson is clear: any effort to look beyond the shadow of uncertainty can only lead one deeper into a region of even thicker shadow.

As Rella shows, Romanticism can be seen to express the meaning of that deeper shadow. For Rella it is Schelling, Leopardi, T. S. Eliot, and Montale, Rella's readings of whose works make up a good portion of the book's second half, who embody and extend the Romantic engagement with mystery and ambiguity. What draws these otherwise diverse figures together in Rella's interpretation is their understanding, whether implicitly through use, or explicitly through theory, of imaginative affect as the cognitive faculty that reveals the ambiguity at the heart of being. As an example of such imagining, Rella turns to the Romantic genre of landscape painting. Here, he finds not a likeness of nature, but instead a depiction of something found specifically within the artist. That something is the "duplicità" of ambiguity, which imbues landscape with a melancholic affect (110). It is thus not nature that is depicted on the canvas, but the fruits of an introspective, and ultimately tragic, imagination.

It is in fact on the notion of the cognitive function of imagination that Rella's book balances, and it is through that cognitive function that the idea of a tragic epistemology becomes intelligible. For it is through imagination — in other words, through the associative, and above all affective, transformation of the given — that the world can be held in suspension between contradictions, or in an ambiguity that refuses to resolve itself. It is also through imagination that a realm of possibility outside the boundaries of the yes or no of propositional truth can arise.

In addressing the question of the affective crossing of existential ambiguity and the artistic imagination, Rella offers not only the continued interpretive exploration of the sources that engage him, but also a deeper elaboration of an outlook he has developed throughout his earlier works.

Daniel Barbiero, *Silver Spring, MD*

**John Kleiner. *Mismapping the Underworld: Daring and Error in Dante's Comedy*. *Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994. Pp. 182.**

For six centuries most of Dante's readers have viewed the *Comedy* as a paradigm of artistic control, a monument so intricately structured as to lend some plausibility, if not intelligibility, to the text's suggestions that it is supernaturally inspired. John Kleiner's brief book has a broad aim: by forcing us to take seriously the "irritating glitches" (12) that undercut the perfect systems of structure and meaning that we discover in the text, he wishes us to discover a Dante who takes his own poetic and "didactic" ambitions less seriously than we had imagined. As Kleiner notes, this

project is in keeping with the tenor of our time: since "the essences of creation, the living harmonies . . . and cosmic patterns that once excited De Sanctis and Curtius are simply no longer accessible," the super-human "cosmographer-poet has been replaced in our imaginations by a more skeptical, more constrained, and more devious kind of writer — someone who is, on the whole, much more like ourselves" (1-2).

*Mismapping the Underworld* is both elegantly written and elegantly structured, a lucid distillation from the author's previous studies: a 1991 Stanford dissertation (*Mismapping the Underworld: Essays on Error in Dante*), "Mismapping the Underworld" (*Dante Studies* 107 [1989] 1-31), "The Eclipses in the *Paradiso*" (*Stanford Italian Review* 9.1-2 [1990] 5-32), and "Finding the Center: Revelation and Reticence in the *Vita nuova*" (*Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 32.1 [1990] 85-100). The "errors" that interest Kleiner are those anomalies or inconsistencies that can "be shown to be deliberately designed" (3). The three central chapters treat such discrepancies in three categories:

1) Topographical contradictions in the physical terrain of Hell. Noting that the Renaissance passion for measuring Dante's Hell is now in disfavor, Kleiner suggests that this is not only because mathematical idealism is out of fashion, but also because Dante's quantitative spatial indications, all eight of which occur in the last five cantos of the *Inferno*, are inconsistent. Satan, for example, must be 2,500 feet tall, which places the traitors in his mouths out of Dante's sight; when Dante compares Satan to a distant windmill (*Inf.* 34:46), "he is standing less than five city blocks from a structure taller and more massive than the largest skyscraper" (45). Nimrod's head "is twice as large as it should be" (46); the *ponticelli* (*Inf.* 18:15) that cross the Malebolge are a half-mile long; the "pozzo assai . . . profondo" of Cocytus (18:5) is only 35 feet deep. Kleiner concludes that Dante's measurements "reveal a terrain disordered by number and measure" (47). This is an attractive idea, though the evidence may be too slight to justify it. Less convincing, though intriguing, are the broad suggestions about "Dante's poetic agenda" (59) that Kleiner proceeds to draw from it: Dante is ironically exposing his realism (48), and parodying his own pretensions to judge his fellow man; "it is not God's Hell that is deformed, but Dante's counterfeit" (54). As the mismeasuring artists Nimrod and Maestro Adamo are themselves mismeasured or distorted, so Dante, as he edges "toward fraud and hubris" in the last cantos of the *Inferno*, reveals himself as a poetic mismeasurer of justice, and is swallowed by his distorted Hell as Perillus was roasted in his bronze bull (*Inf.* 27:7-15).

2) Mis-citation and misinterpretation of "very famous poems" (58). Here Kleiner focuses on the diviners in *Inf.* 20 ("Virgil presents five seers in *Inferno* 20 derived from four different Latin epics, and in every case he either mistakes the tone of the text he is citing or contradicts some basic fact" [64]), and on Statius's "mistranslation" of Virgil's "auri sacra fames" in *Purg.* 22. This chapter betrays most the odd ingenuousness that surfaces in this ingenious book: what are "facts," what are "mistakes," when one poet assimilates the poetry of another? Kleiner seems to conceive only three possibilities: a) an "aggressive and ungrateful" Dante is

"asserting his right as Christian narrator to steal and distort at will" (84); b) Dante's distortions have a "didactic function," for they aim "to teach his readers a lesson" (82) and "establish the authority of Christian teachings" (77); c) Dante's distortions — and this is Kleiner's view — are "an erudite joke on erudition" (83), they are a "comic deflation of an aggressive impulse" (84) and show a "comic exuberance" (82). This "self-ironic" Dante (71) is a bold notion, but to those who have lived with the *Comedy* it may seem neither intuitively likely nor illuminating. There may be a fourth possibility: Dante is an artist. Kleiner's analysis does not penetrate what the *Comedy*'s deeper artistic purposes and methods may be. For example, granted that Dante is not simply "an exemplary apologist for Christian dogma" (161n36), but could he be probing, and seeking, a fusion between Christic revelation and poetic experience? Kleiner states baldly, "no matter how vocally Dante asserts his rights as prophet and visionary, he is neither. The *Comedy* is not sacred scripture but a secular poem written by a secular poet. Dante knows that we know this . . ." (54). Does he? Do we? Do we know what Scripture is? What a prophet is? Have we asked what grounds all authority, what makes poetry Scripture, fantasy vision, speech prophecy? Isn't the *Comedy* exploring, with unrivaled subtlety and profundity, precisely these questions?

3) Self-defeating scientific precision. This includes Dante's appeal to view the (invisible) cross formed by the ecliptic and the equator (*Par.* 10:7-24), the lunar eclipse that results from the opening simile of *Par.* 29, and the unperformability of the mirror experiment of *Par.* 2 (the observer's body gets in the way). Here Kleiner is at his best: his explanations of these difficult passages are wonderfully clear, and his immediate conclusions (e.g., in each case Dante is linking eclipse and crucifixion; what we discover in the mirror experiment "is our own corporeality" [107]) are both important and exciting. Again, his broader conclusions about Dante's poetic aims (Dante is indulging in "playful pyrotechnics" [110]; he is digressing "into an aimless aesthetic space, because in paradise nothing more can be hoped for from his poetry" [110]; "violence, crisis, and disorder are reworked by the poet-cosmologist into the comic categories of play, diversity, and productive complexity" [116]) are somewhat perplexing. One almost feels like asking, "What then?"

The three central chapters are framed by two chapters on poetic structure. These aim to show that an enthusiasm for finding perfect order in medieval art has "led critics to underestimate Dante's tolerance, even enthusiasm, for imperfection, asymmetry, and monstrosity" (3). The first chapter considers the discovery, in the *Vita nuova*, of a symmetrical arrangement of poems around a center marked by Beatrice's death. Kleiner reminds us that the classification of the *Vita nuova*'s fragment-poems is problematic, and that Beatrice in a sense dies twice, first in dream and later in fact. From this he concludes that Dante is "ambivalent about his project and 'uncentered' as an artist," and has failed "to create a perfectly ordered, perfectly coherent work" (21). "Had Dante managed to finish 'Si lungiamente,' the collection as a whole would have lost its order and its center; Dante only finishes the total work by leaving part of it unfinished" (16). The phrase "managed to finish" must make us



ask — as does the concept “deliberately designed error” — how clearly conceived *finished, unfinished, error, perfection, order, disorder*, are as terms of analysis.

The last chapter discusses Geryon, whose appearance marks the center of the *Inferno*. Following Franco Ferrucci, Kleiner reads “the encounter with Geryon as a meditation on poetry” and argues that Dante “uses Geryon to show us fiction’s proximity to fraud, its perilous attractiveness, and its susceptibility to perversion” (132). He suggests that “the ugly monster’s central position” is “a sign of the poet’s anxiety,” a figure “for a failure of art to serve a sanctioned purpose” (126). These are stimulating thoughts, which raise deep questions about Dante’s sense of his own project. Again, Kleiner’s suggestion that Dante, like Ovid, is simply “staging the anxiety of transgression” and is not “actually suffering from it” (136), while provocative, might be evading these questions. Is Dante really only playing?

Christian Moevs, *The University of Notre Dame*

**Rodney J. Payton.** *A Modern Reader's Guide to Dante's Inferno*. New York: Peter Lang, 1992. Pp. 264.

It is not an easy task to introduce readers to the *Inferno*, and in many respects Rodney Payton has done a fine job of it. He is writing not for scholars but for students who are approaching the text for the first time — undergraduate students, I presume. His aim is not to offer a new scholarly interpretation of the *Inferno*, but to draw faithfully on the work of Dante specialists and synthesize some of their insights into what he calls “everyday language” (xi), adding from time to time observations of his own. His style is therefore informal, and on the whole that makes for easy, though not always elegant, reading. In any event, Payton’s study is the kind of book that students, I believe, will eagerly read because it is written in a language that is accessible to them. In sum, this is not a study that readers familiar with scholarship on the *Inferno* will likely want to consult, but it is one that students, and certainly students who are having difficulty with the poem, will probably find useful and enjoyable.

For the most part teachers of the *Inferno* may assume, at least from the point of view of this reader, that Payton is a reliable guide. However, after leaving aside some of the inevitable differences in opinion regarding how the poem should in parts be read, I do have one reservation with regard to Payton as a guide, and that has to do with his choice of interlocutors at times. For a study that seeks to draw upon the work of the best critics of our time and pass that work on to a potentially wide body of students, I fail to understand why the studies of Auerbach and Mazzotta are left out altogether, and Singleton’s *Elements of Structure* and Barolini’s *Dante's Poets* are never mentioned. These are among the foremost Dante scholars, all of whom have written extensively and influentially on the *Inferno*. A modern guide, I assume, should also include the best of the modern critics.

The introduction to *A Modern Reader's Guide* provides a brief background of some basic concepts helpful for a general understanding of the Middle Ages and Dante's poem. Among those discussed are the ethical organization of the universe, principles of correspondence and authority, and the Ptolemaic cosmos. Payton does not discuss Dante's life in the introduction, assuming (perhaps incorrectly) that students will pick up that information from most editions of the *Inferno*. He also leaves his discussion of the political background to Dante's period until a later point in the study (pp. 64-67 in particular).

Payton then proceeds to work sequentially through the *Inferno*. While many cantos receive separate treatment, some are grouped together (V-IX; XVI-XVII; XVIII-XIX; XXI-XXII; XXII-XXV; XXIX-XXX; XXXI-XXXII). No unifying vision is offered, other than to periodically point out that the *Inferno* operates as a "place memory system," and to argue (though strangely without ever referring to Barolini) that the wayfarer *qua* poet is gradually learning in the course of his voyage to become the celebrated author who will one day write the poem we read. Payton is best, I feel, when he works close to the text and with figural readings, along with readings inspired by Aquinas's *Summa*. His discussions of the traditionally anthologized cantos (V, XIII, XV, XXVI, XXXIII) are somewhat disappointing, however. Nevertheless, it should be said that Payton's aim is not to provide in-depth readings of these cantos, but to offer an overview of both them and the *cantica* as a whole, which undergraduate students often need. In this I believe he has done a reliable job.

Douglas Biow, *The University of Texas at Austin*

**Patrick Boyde. Perception and Passion in Dante's Comedy.** Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. Pp. xiii + 348.

If the subject of Dante's *Commedia* is literally "the state of souls after death" (*Epist.* 13.8.24), this singularly learned author must have based his work on the "science of souls," namely, psychology. Yet, although we have studies of Dante's use of scholastic sciences less central to his work — e.g., law, medicine, astronomy, and even astrology — strange to say no one has devoted a monograph to Dante's psychological doctrine. Now Patrick Boyde, a professor of Italian at Cambridge, has in large part filled this gap with the present study, which is in effect a reader's guide to Dantean psychology.

Boyde has already given us a similar guide to the rest of Dante's natural science in *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos* (1981), in which two further volumes were promised (281), to be subtitled *Man in Society* and *Man and God*. This is not the expected sequel but instead is an independent work "written in the same spirit" (xi). Although students were the intended audience of both works, the

former one somewhat missed the mark by copious quotations in Latin and abundant references to the secondary literature (see my review in *L'Alighieri* 23.2 [1982]: 57-59). The present work, however, is right on target, with a mere thirty pages of austere references to the primary sources and almost none to secondary ones.

The scope of the work is broader than the title suggests. Part 1 is an admirably concise introduction to Aristotle's general concept of nature and its application to subhuman forms of life in particular. Turning then to man, the rational animal, in Part 2 Boyde treats the animal powers of man — the "perception and passion" of the title — and then in Part 3 his rational powers, namely, intellect and will. Finally, Part 4 shows how these two sets of powers interact as "combined operations" in the passions of fear, anger, and desire. Thus, despite Boyde's catchy title, rational psychology is given its due.

Boyde's primary purpose is to provide the reader with enough (but only enough) understanding of Aristotle's psychology to appreciate Dante's use of it. He simplifies his presentation by relying almost exclusively on Aquinas's commentaries (302), although Dante also drew heavily on those of Albertus Magnus and Averroes, the latter being the standard in arts courses until the end of the Middle Ages. I am not as confident as Boyde that there was a consensus in Dante's day on the passages he cites (302). To be sure, it is better not to confuse the beginner with subtleties, but neither should he be misled to believe they do not exist.

Above all, Boyde means to show the reader "that Dante's fictions are rooted in his thought, and that his thought is representative of his time" (259). Thus each of his expositions of Aristotle is accompanied by examples of Dante's use of the relevant concepts. Typically an example consists of an extensive paraphrase of the Dantean passage, supported as a rule by the key texts in both Italian and English. Boyde is generally content to show the connection between Aristotle and Dante by simply pointing out the presence of Aristotelian terminology, usually by setting it off with quotation marks. Occasionally he pauses to explain how an awareness of the Aristotelian source enriches our understanding of the text, but he does so all too infrequently. Doubtless this tendency to belabor what is obvious to specialists, and to minimize what interests them most, reflects the book's origin in presentations not only to undergraduates but to a general audience (xi). Still, I suspect that students would profit even more if the connections were made explicit for them. In short — to employ a scale of which Boyde is fond — this book is good for scholars, better for teachers, and best for students.

Richard Kay, *University of Kansas*



Steven Botterill. *Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the Commedia*. Cambridge: UP, 1994. Pp. 269

"Reading" e "re-reading" è il ritornello che il lettore del testo in questione sentirà più volte elevarsi dalle pagine che man mano scorrono sotto i suoi occhi. Un ritornello destinato a sintetizzare in due parole il metodo di lettura che l'autore si prefigge di seguire: "the poem must be read intertextually as well as intrinsically" (19). Ciò suppone evidentemente che ogni lettore della *Commedia* debba avere più che una buona conoscenza sia del testo in se stesso che del suo contesto culturale. Il ruolo del lettore, quindi, è importantissimo, ma al tempo stesso, osserva Botterill, è il meno stabile rispetto al ruolo dell'autore del testo e a quello del testo stesso. Così, leggere è criticare, criticare è giudicare; ma ogni giudizio nasce da un codice che il lettore si prefigge. Difatti autore e testo possono essere sradicati dallo spazio e dal tempo in cui sono nati per poi essere esaminati e giudicati alla luce di teorie postmoderne, come quelle della differenza, del desiderio, dello pseudomisticismo. Botterill si distacca nettamente da questi sistemi di lettura. Questi, messi insieme con pezzi tratti dai nostri filosofi contemporanei, spesso si trasformano in letti di Procruste, su cui vengono stesi l'autore e il testo, entrambi costretti a rientrarci a costo di stiramenti e di mutilazioni fatte da ogni parte fino a renderli irriconoscibili. Evidentemente non si condannano i nuovi strumenti critici, a cui tutto dobbiamo se oggi l'intellectione dell'arte si è allargata e approfondita; ci si lamenta dell'abuso di essi che finiscono per ricreare un Dante che non è più né moderno né medievale.

La lettura critica degli ultimi canti del *Paradiso* nasce dalla giustificata curiosità dell'autore di spiegarsi se S. Bernardo nella *Commedia* svolga un ruolo essenziale o meno; cioè, era proprio necessario che Dante, a quel dato momento del viaggio, sostituisse Beatrice con il santo; o la sostituzione era solo un espediente di natura retorica? Per darne una soluzione, Botterill va indietro nello spazio e nel tempo, convinto, come si è detto, che solo la conoscenza del contesto storico e del testo poetico può trasmettere quella carica di luce che ci permette di comprendere l'intera visione di Dante (19). Certamente nel testo dantesco c'è ancora molto da scoprire. Con un'immagine stupenda, Botterill definisce la *Commedia* "a Heraclitian river." Egli si riferisce soprattutto alla ricchezza straordinaria del contenuto che ti balza alla mente e si rifrange in nuove possibilità interpretative. Certamente non è il contenuto che muta, ma è la vista del lettore che si potenzia attraverso nuovi studi. Il testo e il lettore si comportano rispettivamente come Beatrice e Dante nell'ascesi all'Empireo. Pensava il pellegrino che la bellezza della sua donna aumentasse da cielo a cielo e non si rendeva conto che erano invece gli occhi della sua mente ad aprirsi sempre più alla luce e venirne potenziati fino al punto da sperimentare più e più la bellezza sovrumana della Guida. Così, da secoli si percorrono le acque della *Commedia*; eppure, come nota giustamente l'autore, la presenza di S. Bernardo nell'ultima parte del *Paradiso* si è accettata sempre come un teorema per se noto. La scomparsa di Beatrice ci è sempre apparsa normale e in simmetria con la scomparsa di Virgilio.

Lo studio destinato a dare una soluzione giustificatoria dell'episodio vien diviso

in due parti che si totalizzano in sette capitoli. La prima parte ("Reading") è suddivisa in due capitoli, nel primo dei quali ("The image of St. Bernard in medieval culture") vengono presentati i risultati di una vasta e accurata ricerca storica che riflette il viaggio dello studioso attraverso biblioteche per avvicinare direttamente testi scritti da S. Bernardo o da autori che parlano di lui. Lo scopo della ricerca è chiaro: stabilire il peso e la qualità della presenza di S. Bernardo nella cultura medievale. A conclusione della sua indagine, Botterill rileva che gli aspetti essenziali e qualificanti attribuiti al santo sono: autore, dottore di teologia mariana, mistico, contemplativo. Nel capitolo successivo ("Bernard of Clairvaux in the *Commedia*") vengono invece esaminati e analizzati quei canti ove il profilo del personaggio di S. Bernardo è opera realizzata dall'autore Dante. L'esame evidentemente è destinato a scoprire quali tratti del Santo storico sono rientrati a far parte del personaggio della *Commedia*.

Trovo l'analisi di questi canti del *Paradiso* (XXXI-II-III) profonda e affascinante. L'autore fa notare come l'episodio di S. Bernardo vien preparato fin dal canto XXII 60, ove Dante esprime il suo "alto disio" di veder "con immagine scoperta." Ciò si realizzerà, gli risponde S. Benedetto, "su l'ultima spera." Evidenziati gli elementi strutturali che uniscono questo canto al canto XXXI, l'autore ne deduce che la funzione specifica del santo di Chiaravalle è di avviare Dante alla catarsi finale ("inspire and guarantor of Dante's spiritual re-vision of his behaviour"). Attraverso l'azione di S. Bernardo, il pellegrino dovrà man mano distaccarsi da Beatrice e apprendere che l'oggetto del suo "alto disio" è solo l'Assoluto. Bernardo, infatti, gli addita Beatrice come "effigie", parte, come altre parti, dell'universo, e, quindi, come strumento e non come causa finale del suo viaggio. Da qui, nota lo studioso, gli attributi di S. Bernardo storico divengono componenti essenziali del personaggio dantesco: maestro, immagine di Cristo, devoto di Maria, contemplativo.

Nella seconda parte del libro ("Re-reading"), l'indagine si sposta e si accentra su quattro punti sviluppati in altrettanti capitoli: (1) "Bernard in the Trecento commentaries on the *Commedia*." Lo studio è inteso a cogliere pareri più freschi e in qualche modo più autentici attraverso l'interpretazione che dei canti surriferiti ne danno i vecchi commenti di autori più vicini a Dante. Da un'antologia di autori e di testi (dai commenti di Jacopo della Lana, Pietro di Dante, Giovanni Boccaccio, Francesco da Buti, Benvenuto da Imola, fino a quello di Giovanni da Serravalle), Botterill riscontra che esiste una certa continuità tra questi commenti e la tradizione culturale riguardante gli aspetti essenziali di S. Bernardo. (2) In "Dante, Bernard, and the Virgin Mary", si verifica se la preghiera di Dante alla Vergine dipenda dagli scritti di S. Bernardo. Tra critici che l'affermano e quelli che la rifiutano, l'autore, dopo un accurato esame di studi che recentemente hanno ridimensionato la figura di S. Bernardo come teologo di Maria, definisce S. Bernardo, piuttosto che teologo, "poeta della devozione a Maria" (168). Basandosi sul testo della *Commedia*, conclude che il punto che congiunge Bernardo e Dante è proprio la "fusione di elementi lirici e dottrinali che esprimono questa devozione" (168). Ma per quanto riguarda la lettura dei testi mariani da parte di Dante, si afferma che non esistono prove testuali per dimostrarlo (192). (3) "From *deificari* to *trasumanar*? Dante's *Paradiso* and Bernard's

*De diligendo Deo*” è un altro capitolo di profonda e vasta ricerca. L'autore, seguendo la pista già tracciata da Rosetta Migliorini Fissi per stabilire il concetto e la portata del termine *deificari*, procede attraverso un'ampia rassegna di testi tratti dai Padri e dai Dottori della Chiesa. Botterill trova in S. Agostino il precedente teorico del termine “deificari” da cui dipenderebbe S. Bernardo e Dante: “The full glory of deified being could be experienced only by the redeemed soul in Heaven, after the resurrection of the body. Deification cannot be fully achieved in this life, for the body is finite, its sense limited and doomed to fail and our knowledge of God must remain restricted by these ineluctable signs of our physical immortality” (206). Quindi la deificazione resta un fatto in sé ineffabile ed è proprio attraverso la figura di Glauco che Dante sottolinea questa ineffabilità. (4) Nell'ultimo capitolo (“Eloquence — and its limits”) Botterill discute il valore della retorica. La funzione del personaggio di Virgilio si riassumerebbe nel poeta dalla “parola ornata” e “fonte . . . di parlar”. La linea narrativa della *Commedia* si sviluppa in un movimento che va da una parola ornata a un'altra; da Virgilio a S. Bernardo. L'una offre onore terreno; l'altra eterno (244). La parola, pertanto, resta essenziale per il raggiungimento dei rispettivi fini delle due parti. Da qui Botterill deduce il limite della retorica. Per darne una prova indiscutibile, egli esamina tre elementi: la parola, il carattere e la struttura narrativa dell'*Inferno* (244).

Non solo Virgilio è autore di “parole ornate”, ma anche Giasone, il quale, però, se ne serve per fini immorali. Inoltre, continua l'autore, nel caso di Virgilio l'eloquenza non è sempre operativa come principio che governa la sua scelta e l'uso delle parole; essa ha limiti, come dimostra l'impotenza di Virgilio di fronte ai diavoli. Infine l’“orazion picciola” di Ulisse confermerebbe irrefutabilmente la tesi della natura equivoca della retorica. Da qui l'autore sembra chiedersi: come può accordarsi la realtà equivoca e menzognera della parola con la pretesa di Dante che si dichiara poeta della verità? Certa critica, osserva Botterill, sostiene che Dante sa di essere nella trappola della contraddizione, ma vi saltella allegramente.

Dal momento che l'autore c'invita al *reading* e al *re-reading* del testo e del contesto, egli mi permetterà di espimere qualche mia riflessione a proposito di quest'ultimo capitolo. Il poeta fiorentino ha scelto come fondamento della sua poetica l'*honestum* e la *rectitudo*, concetti che da Cicerone passano attraverso il filtro dell'interpretazione di S. Agostino e, giù giù, fino a quella di S. Alberto Magno. Per questi il termine “*honestum*” è una unità potenziale che implica tre distinti valori: *verum*, *bonum*, *pulchrum*. La poesia di Dante è onesta in quanto contrassegnata da questi tre elementi. Tutti ricordiamo la sintesi definitoria della poetica dantesca: “la bontade e la bellezza di ciascuno sermone sono intra loro partite e diverse; che la bontade è nella sentenza, e la bellezza è ne l'ornamento de le parole; e l'una e l'altra è con diletto, avvegna che la bontade sia massimamente dilettoza” (*Conv.* II,xi,4). Botterill ha fatto osservare molto chiaramente che l'espressione “parole ornate” è equivoca e ambivalente; difatti per Dante “l'ornamento de le parole” è accidente distinto dalla sostanza e, come tale, può affibiarsi sia al discorso di Virgilio che a quello di Giasone. Quello che crea l'*honestum poeticum* è solo l'intima fusione di



entrambe le componenti ("La bontade e la bellezza . . . e l'una e l'altra è con diletto"). Così, poiché per Dante la poesia appartiene alla categoria conoscitiva, il *bonum poeticum* è il *verum*. Difatti il poeta afferma "'l vero è lo bene de lo intelletto" (*Conv.* II,xiii,6). La *Commedia* vien presentata dall'autore come un trattato sul "ben" ("per trattar del ben") e il "ben" è il vero poetico che nasce dalla "scientia, ingenium et ars", cioè dalla scienza filosofica, teologica e morale filtrata attraverso l'immaginazione del poeta e composta e espressa artisticamente. Con ciò si vuol dire che Dante attinge il materiale inventivo dallo scibile umano e sovrumano; non è un apostolo rivelatore di verità nuove, né tanto meno qualcuno che presuma di scrivere, di condannare o di premiare come Iddio; è un poeta che è riuscito a servirsi della scienza e della storia (che aveva già condannato o premiato i suoi personaggi prima di lui) per trasformarle in arte parlante. Nessuno penserebbe che il triregno da lui creato e cantato s'identifichi con la realtà creduta, come nessuno pensa che il *Giudizio* di Michelangelo rifletta *talis et qualis* quello futuro a cui il cristiano crede. Ma ognuno può accettare che, stando alla realtà rivelata e descritta nei libri santi, il poeta è riuscito a dare di essa una rappresentazione poetica, la cui sostanza (cioè il "ben" nascosto sotto la parola ornata) è teologicamente vera. Dante non va al di là del "segno", ma si mantiene costantemente nei limiti della verità rivelata come la intuisce attraverso l'immaginazione. Leggere i testi sacri e teologici che trattano del *Paradiso* e recepirli nell'immaginazione e poi proiettarsi davanti agli occhi un paradiso fondato su quei testi, questo prodotto di intelligenza e di fantasia, mi sembra, non si costituisce come una favola senza fondamento, e tanto meno come una bugia. È chiaro, ma per chi non crede che cosa non è favola? Tuttavia Dante è un credente del medioevo. L'arco della sua realtà poggia su due elementi: *metexis* o *participatio* e *Absolutus* o il "divino Altro" che il poeta definisce: "Lo ben . . . Alfa e O è di quanta scrittura mi legge Amore o lievemente o forte" (*Par.* XXVI: 16-18). La poesia di Dante nasce dal suo dramma storico (politico, sociale, religioso) che si risolve nella visione consolatoria della partecipazione dell'essere all'Uno o nel desiderio di contemplazione che nel *Paradiso* si rappresenta poeticamente come viaggio, non a Beatrice, come Botterill ha dimostrato con forza persuasiva, ma alla "somma . . . luce" (*Par.* XXXIII: 67). Non nasce poesia dall'animo di chi non crede in ciò che dice. Se dietro alla mente di Dante vi fosse la contraddizione e l'inganno piuttosto che la sua fede e il suo doloroso dramma autobiografico, non avremmo che "Heracitian river" in cui si guarda da secoli e in cui si scorgono sempre cose nuove e sostanzialmente coerenti con la verità filosofica e teologica, come ne dà ancora una prova il testo di Steven Botterill.

Così non pensiamo che la funzione di Virgilio personaggio si essenzializzi esclusivamente nella "parola ornata", quanto piuttosto nella sua onestà di poeta e nella sua abilità comunicativa ("fidandomi del tuo parlare onesto" *Inf.* 2:113). Virgilio, difatti, riconosce i suoi limiti sia davanti alla porta di Dite ove crede che al di sopra della sua sapienza razionale, v'è "Tal ne s'offerse"; sia sul monte del Purgatorio, quando umilmente confessa: "se' venuto in parte / dov'io per me più oltre non discerno" (XXVII: 127-8). Quell'arrestarsi perché "più oltre non discerno" lo

pone esattamente agli antipodi dell'altro personaggio, Ulisse, il quale non teme di violare i "riguardi" per soddisfare con mezzi umani l'innato desiderio di sovrapporsi agli altri come un Dio.

In conclusione, devo onestamente ammettere che la lettura del testo di Steven Botterill mi ha stimolato intellettualmente e mi ha affascinato stilisticamente; esso si aggiunge degnamente alla lista degli ottimi lavori pubblicati negli Stati Uniti sulla *Commedia* di Dante; la sua è una ricerca scientifica seria e profonda non solo nell'ambito del testo, ma del contesto storico e filologico.

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**Ricardo J. Quinones. *Foundation Sacrifice in Dante's Commedia*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994. Pp. 135.**

In this study we now have at hand a thorough and attentive consideration of Dante's coming to terms with the ancient myth of foundation sacrifice. Building upon *The Changes of Cain* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), an examination of the Cain and Abel story and the leitmotif of fratricide, Ricardo Quinones now turns his attention to how Dante understood this "dark event" and its many retellings, and more generally the belief that "existence itself requires and is even based upon the sacrifice of the brother, the death of the 'other'" (11).

Quinones observes that in Dante's poem "small keys open large doors" (32). Handled with sensitivity and discernment, and benefiting from Quinones's familiarity with an impressive range of sources, foundation sacrifice proves a key that opens a convincing number of them. His purpose is to demonstrate that this "dominant motif" casts new light on the interrelatedness of the three canticles of the poem, showing how each provides a response to the cycles of violence arising from foundation sacrifice. This results in new readings of many of the poem's most compelling episodes, such as the exclusion of Virgil. Quinones's enthusiasm for the richness of this motif and his enviable erudition give us abundant references to Machiavelli, Montaigne, Shakespeare, and others; eventually he promises a volume on foundation sacrifice in Shakespeare. Yet despite this wide range of sources and the "essayistic" disclaimer, the study exhibits a tight structure which mirrors the composition of the poem it treats: its chapters are linked in a generative way so that the reader comes to a progressive understanding of the evolution of Dante's response to foundation sacrifice.

The book is divided into three parts, one for each canticle of the *Commedia*. Quinones notes at the outset that "at this point there is not much to be gained by describing foundation sacrifice in other than a generalized way," preferring to develop the definition incrementally through an application of the general principle to specific instances as well as larger concepts (2). This requires the reader to follow

an ever-expanding and rather fluid definition, but ultimately results in a well-rounded and complete picture. To read the book is to participate in the process of defining, much like reading the *Commedia* itself.

Part I begins with "Foundation Sacrifice in Florentine History," which examines Dante's problematic relationship to his homeland, characterized by the ambivalence of the exile. The allegiance of the *Inferno's* vivid characters to *locus et gens* contrasts with Dante's rejection of hereditary loyalties and rivalries. For Quinones, Dante's "prevailing great event" was the murder of Buondelmonte on Easter Sunday in 1215 (13-14). He skillfully ties Cacciaguida's recounting of this murder in the *Paradiso*, with its obvious links to the sacrifice of Christ, to Dante's initial rejection of foundation sacrifice as the cause rather than the end of repeated violence.

The second chapter, "Foundation Sacrifice in Religious History," applies these same principles to the role of Caiaphas and Annas in the death of Christ. A fuller discussion of Christ's sacrifice and its implications in foundation sacrifice await the reader in the book's final chapter, but here Quinones concerns himself with Dante's repudiation of Caiaphas's counsel that "the one be sacrificed for the many," a "fraude pieuse" based on expedience rather than justice, and thus a contamination of the religious sphere by political motives (33). Quinones also provides a convincing explanation for Virgil's amazement at the crucifixion of Caiaphas, arguing that Virgil clearly accepts the requirements of foundation sacrifice, and thus is confused to find that such a rational act could result in damnation.

In Part II, Quinones argues that pilgrimage and brotherhood, which give the *Purgatorio* its "sense of separation, alienation, and gratifying encounters and moving exchanges," constitute intermediate steps in Dante's rejection of foundation sacrifice (52). In "Pilgrimage, Brotherhood, and Foundation Sacrifice," he shows his colors as the "rediscoverer of the *Purgatorio*." An obvious affection for his subject warms his prose ("the supreme lyricism of the *Purgatorio*," 53), and much space is given, including copious notes, to the historical and theological development of the "in-between place," as well as to the history of *Purgatorio* criticism. By means of a painstaking counting and classification of similes, adjectives, forms of address and baptismal and familial names, Quinones demonstrates that the souls of *Purgatory* seek to transcend foundation sacrifice through spiritual brotherhood and alienation from place. While he cautiously notes that this "extraordinary accumulation . . . still leaves room for exceptions" (61), he deals skillfully with several, notably Sordello's "O mantovano, io son Sordello / della tua terra" of canto VI, among others.

His chapter on Virgil, "the excluded other of the *Purgatorio*," goes back to Ulysses and the *Inferno* to flesh out a contrastive portrait of the links and discontinuities between Greek and Roman culture, concluding that while both Dante and Ulysses, unlike Virgil, reject foundation sacrifice, Dante's ultimate rejection of Ulysses demonstrates the latter's deficient understanding of brotherhood and community and of the necessity to "pass through the moral and ethical world" (82). Virgil's departure is ultimately required by the link between foundation sacrifice and the double, variously described as the return of the brother (or "other" or "twin"). This



theory, treated in greater detail in *The Changes of Cain*, involves two sacrificial deaths: that of the *diabolus* or obstacle, and that of the *daimon* or "some inner principle of the self" (86). Virgil must be symbolically slain in order for Dante to become sovereign over himself, as indicated in his parting "over thyself I crown and mitre thee." Acknowledging the grief associated with this necessary loss, Quinones adds Shakespeare's "on such sacrifices . . . the gods themselves throw incense" to Dante's reference to Christ's entry into Jerusalem and Virgil's "manibus o date lilia plenis" (90).

Part III opens the discussion of foundation sacrifice in the *Paradiso* with "The World the Father Has Created," placing brotherhood relative to fatherhood on the poem's "scale of ascendancy" (101). Fatherhood and the related concept of *paideia*, the imitation of an "exemplar," are not without their own dramas, including the imperative to abandon false fathers. *Paideia* is rendered useless by the prevalence of false exemplars in the *Inferno* and by the fellowship of equals in the *Purgatorio*, but is rehabilitated in the *Paradiso*. And while fatherhood is "preeminently a favoring principle," it also resolves the problem of inequality by valorizing humility and providing a sense of belonging to a larger design (108).

"From Mars to Martyrdom" deals specifically with the predictions of Dante's exile, which culminate in the Cacciaguida episode. Quinones scrupulously develops the conceptual links between Mars and martyrdom, despite the admitted absence of an etymological connection. The shedding of blood is an intrinsic part of foundation sacrifice as well as martyrdom, which in turn transforms it. The reference to Cacciaguida's birth recalls the inevitability of "blood beginnings and blood endings," as "Christ wedded the church with his blood" (128). When Dante's sacrifice in *Paradiso* XIV transforms Mars into a cross, Quinones sees this as a sign that foundation sacrifice has been subsumed into the sacrifice of Christ.

Quinones makes no claim that foundation sacrifice, his key in this study, is the only one, promising only that it "enables us to confront . . . Dante's poem in new ways" (1). This "dark event" proves itself sufficiently flexible and rich to respond to the progressive levels of understanding embedded in the poem's tripartite structure, and at the same time helps to situate the poem within the larger story of the human "parable for existence" (2). Its unifying nature permits Quinones to range far and yet to write a book for all readers of Dante, the general public and scholars, though the former would have been better served by a more detailed index (the present index lacks, for example, an entry for "Christ"). The entire work is suffused with Quinones's obvious love for his subject and by his inclusive approach, which casts a wide net for allusions and affinities: one sentence alone refers to "James Joyce, W. H. Auden, Pablo Neruda, William Kennedy, Seamus Healey" (97). Such a synoptic and energetic vision occasionally lends itself to unexpected locutions: "the pain of the passingness" (128); or the likening of the *Purgatorio* to therapy: "one does not advise a recovering alcoholic . . . to take one drink" (102-03). Somewhat enigmatic is the recourse to French terms: "recueillement, personnage regnant, fraude pieuse." Most frequently, however, the study is written with lucidity and conviction, and it is

to Quinones's great credit that his detailed and complicated argument proceeds with clarity, directness, and emotional appeal.

The essayistic form means that some topics are inevitably treated as incidental rather than as focal points; the application of foundation sacrifice to the death of Christ is one such case. But it is a rare moment when Quinones expects too much of his reader, despite the vastness of the territory he sets out to cover. While occasionally the reader may chafe to know where threads are leading, time and again Quinones brings them convincingly together with remarkable skill. And by renouncing all-encompassing definitions at the outset, choosing rather to define his terms progressively as he moves through the poem, he has written a compelling, readable, and highly recommended study.

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**Giuseppe Mazzotta.** *The Worlds of Petrarch.* Durham: Duke UP, 1993. Pp. xv + 231.

Most chapters of this book were published separately as autonomous studies. However, the author believes that a recurrent theme binds the whole together, namely, "Petrarch's simultaneous thought of history and death" (1). In proposing the unity of his book, Mazzotta introduces the far more problematic question of the unity of his subject, "Petrarch." If we take "history" in this case to mean a positive project for cultural renewal, and "death" as the negativity of an attention to finitude, it becomes clear that the two poles are always combining. In explaining the title of his book, the author recognizes its oxymoron, that basic Petrarchan figure.

But what "worlds"? Since what is at issue is the *simultaneous* thought of difference, and even of opposition, proposing a simple plurality of worlds (philology, faith, politics, etc.) will not do. Nor are these fragments merely parts of an ideal whole. Rather, "Petrarch allows us to speak of unity as a unity of fragments, as a unity of adjacent parts" (4). So the task set for this study concerns the relations between those fragments of experience. As a consequence, some chapters are organized around particular forms of discourse — conversation, letters, polemics, dialogue, prayer — while others contemplate thematic threads: historical change, love, ethics.

Chapter 1, "Antiquity and the New Arts," contemplates Petrarch in his well-known position between two ages. However, the author teases an interesting paradox from the poet's familiar confrontation of Avignon with Rome. The former city, paragon of despised "modernism," may appear purely negative from Petrarch's point of view. But as the locus of a radically renewed art, namely, painting, Avignon provides a "noncanonical, transgressive experience" (32) that enables poetic production. (Less convincing is a related attempt to link Petrarch's opposition to the

*translatio* of the papacy from Rome to Avignon with a subversion of the basis of metaphor, *translatio*.)

In Chapter 2, "The Thought of Love," the author again takes a familiar formulation and makes it productive. What is Petrarch's thought about love, or the thinking that belongs to love? An examination of several of his Latin polemics precedes examples from the *Canzoniere*, and the juxtaposition is provocative. It turns out that thought is an event: the aggressive conflict that constitutes both the history of philosophy and the lyric poet's experience of memory and displacement. To conclude that thought as an event takes place in poetry means a plea for the philosophical dignity of Petrarchan poetry.

The scene is set for the crucial issue of selfhood, treated in Chapters 3, "The *Canzoniere* and the Language of the Self," and 4, "Ethics of Self," which latter concerns the *Familiars* and *Trionfi* as well. In the former chapter, the author confronts the obvious centrality of the self in the *Canzoniere* with the fact that the sequence also calls into question that very centrality. Readings of selected lyrics, including a return to the figure of Narcissus introduced in the first chapter, show the ambiguity of such principles of self-making as memory, imagination and desire. There are also signs of Petrarch's "complex cultural-poetic polemic" (73) against Dante. The following chapter pursues the doubleness of the poet's self-representation, considering the risk of solipsism and the ethical importance of literary style. If Petrarch's ethics is a dream that "the world itself comes into being through the poet's dream" (101), then it would seem that the danger of solipsism is not escaped.

All of which makes a paradoxical preparation for an evaluation of "The World of History" (Chapter 5). The new emphases here include the epistemology of history, Petrarch's "sense of the role of the historian in relation to figurations of power" (103), and his conviction that the historian should cultivate great men. Inevitably, the presence of Rome dominates here, whether in the career of Cola di Rienzo and Petrarch's role therein, or in the concept of history as the "praise of Rome." The author attempts an important distinction between Cola's Romolatry, as a reduction of history to an immobile past, and Petrarch's, as a more forward-looking foundation for transformation and renewal. The distinction does not quite command agreement; this way of pointing out the ambiguities in Petrarch's treatment of ancient *virtus* seems to confuse the intentions of his cultural project with what his texts end up doing.

Certain political concerns also enter into the image of poetic function sketched in Chapter 6, "Orpheus: Rhetoric and Music." The ambition to retrieve classical eloquence, the success of which would permit the poet a public role, runs aground on the failure (according to this interpretation) of Petrarch's political poems. The direction which rhetoric then takes in the private world of love poems is its yoking with music. Mazzotta has interesting things to say about the poet's "phonocentrism," including a reading of sonnet 1 from this point of view.

The final chapter, "Humanism and Monastic Spirituality," does not provide a culmination to the argument, which (as already indicated) is not progressive. It does



treat another familiar opposition, which it makes more interesting by showing the unexpected complexities linking active and contemplative lives (and their exemplification by Petrarch and his brother). We end up, appropriately enough, with a reading of canzone 366 as manifesting a religious, formulaic language "that preexists oneself and that effaces the self" (165). Just as Chapter 2 argues that Petrarch's most philosophical writing is found in his lyrics, so here it is proposed that his most genuinely religious texts also belong to the *Canzoniere*.

Two appendices propose readings of, respectively, canzone 126 and the *Letter to Posterity*, and show the two texts working out themes introduced earlier in the book.

Apart from a few minor slips (Chalcidius was not a "Chartrian" [39]; Cyclops/Cyclopes are the singular and plural [153-55]), I will only venture to mention a few places where an interpretation seems to go beyond the text cited. Thus, to make a passage from the preface to Boccaccio's *Genealogie* say that "death makes the past wholly irretrievable" (125) is to take a stand stronger than Boccaccio's. Perhaps more significantly, in quoting the *Collatio laureationis*, "Michi autem, fateor, hec non ultima causa fuit Romam veniendi" is taken to mean "But for me, I admit it, this was not the decisive reason for coming to Rome" (114). But in fact, taken in context, it means just the opposite: namely, "As for me, I confess, this was not the least important reason for coming to Rome." The interpreter wants to stress the uniqueness of Petrarch's historical sense, and so sees a divergence from a predecessor (Cicero, in this case) where there is none; at least, not in the form alleged.

Such details, and especially the unconvincing parts of the argument(s) mentioned above, are not without importance. But they do not detract from the many sensitive and provocative insights of this ambitious study.

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**David Quint. *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. Pp. x + 433.**

It is impossible to do justice to David Quint's book in narrow compass, for it is fully as deep as it is broad. The study ranges over material from the *Odyssey* to Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, and in between (a capacious "in between" indeed) it manages to include familiar poems of the mainstream (Virgil, Lucan, Tasso, Milton); perhaps less familiar but still well-known work (Camoens' *Os Lusíadas*); and, for most readers, at least, a sampling of the genuinely marginal or downright obscure (the *Araucana* of Alonso de Ercilla, *Les Tragiques* of Agrippa d'Aubigné, as well as a scattering of seventeenth and eighteenth century epigonists and forger-synthesists like Marino, Davenant, Chapelain, and the notorious James Macpherson. Quint is everywhere insightful and illuminating, while maintaining a clear sense of value and

relative merit.

Behind the book's subtitle lies the rough bifurcation of the epic tradition into those poems that deal with history's winners and those that deal with history's losers. As the summary list above suggests, the better known epics are those that fall into the first category, those that, with the benefit of hindsight, can claim the triumph of their heroes as definitive and totalizing, the *eschaton* at which the historical process had been aiming all along. Quint is particularly fine when illuminating various moves to bolster this fundamentally ideological claim, the way the ecphrasis of the hero's shield in Virgil's eighth book, for instance, manages to recast the battle of Actium, in fact the ultimate episode in what had been a thoroughly nasty and protracted civil war, as the conquest of a foreign enemy (21-31). And his analysis of the way Camoens' Adamastor functions both as a representation of Hottentot violence against the Portuguese (incidentally naturalizing that violence and occluding any European provocation that may have occasioned it) and simultaneously as a representation of Portuguese heroic aspiration which effectively cancels awareness of the subjugated other (113-25), is but one particularly deft moment among many such. "The formal completion of the [triumphalist] epic plot," Quint observes, "speaks for the completeness of its vision of history: telling a full story, epic claims to possess *the* full story" (33-34). Meanwhile, the epic of the defeated tells a fragmenting story, tending toward the episodic, multi-plotted romance model, where extended and proliferating narratives suggest the unfinished character of history, its continuing generation of alternatives. Quint even connects Lucan's notorious fondness for severed limbs and assorted body parts to a wish to fragment closed wholes, to assault the smugness of classical completeness (140-47). Where the triumphalist epic hews to the classical-Aristotelian ideal of a teleological story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, the epic of the losing side (which typically understands loss as temporary or provisional) might espouse the antinomian observation often attributed to Jean Anouilh: a story should have a beginning, middle, and end, to be sure, but not necessarily in that order.

At least since Adam Parry's seminal essay of 1963, "The Two Voices of Vergil's *Aeneid*," students of epic have sought out and retrieved from the margins of triumphalist poetry versions of Parry's second voice, still and small, perhaps, but nonetheless insistent in its anti-official counter-message that the prevailing of the collective and universal may not in every instance be worth the suppressing of the individual and local, and that winning often exacts a terrible price from victor and vanquished alike. The escalation of the war in Vietnam shortly after the appearance of Parry's essay and the subsequent storm of anti-war protest from the academy and elsewhere doubtless had much to do with the ascendancy of this sympathy for the underdog. But we are now, thirty years later, experiencing a revisionist correction of sorts, hardly one that is likely to return us to Eliot's canonization of Virgil in *After Strange Gods*, perhaps, but nevertheless evincing an interest in the seriousness with which poems like the *Aeneid*, the *Lusiadas*, and the *Gerusalemme liberata* proffer their ideologically official messages. Quint's is a thoroughly dialectical sensibility,

always attuned to the ways positions tend to turn into their opposites. The somberness of the *Aeneid*'s conclusion, for instance, suggesting civil strife in the face of all ideological efforts to make Aeneas's Italian campaign seem a war of foreign conquest is hardly lost on him. And his brilliant analysis of Clorinda in Tasso's poem, the ways in which this Muslim-Christian woman-warrior unsettles the firm boundaries along which Tasso constructs his most orthodox of epics, is thrown into even higher prominence by his belated attempt to dispel the ambiguities of the Clorinda-Tancredi affair by restaging it in his twentieth canto as the clash between a reformed and reclaimed Rinaldo and the pagan Assimiro, unambiguously male, black, and Muslim (246-47).

And yet on balance, Quint seems to say, the triumphalist epic co-opts and turns to its own purposes the epic of the defeated far more often and efficiently than the other way around. "There is something preemptive," he says, "in the claim that the imperial epic makes to the high ground of classical form, of narrative unity and purpose: the critique of the epic and of the ideological agenda behind it appears to be condemned not so much to the construction of alternative literary forms as to the dismantling of form itself. Hence it is liable to the charge of 'bad form'" (41). And later he elaborates on this "something preemptive" by way of a remarkable quotation from Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* to the effect that the "language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power." "Poetry is right-royal," Hazlitt said, particularly in the way it puts "the one above the infinite" and "might before right" (208). Perhaps Kierkegaard's remarks in *Either/Or* about "external history," the "unopened individual," and the artistic unrepresentability of the largely passive Christian virtues are pertinent here as well. The primacy of the triumphalist epic isn't only an ethical or political matter, Quint suggests, but one entangled in the exigencies of form and structure, in the very limits of representation.

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***Un'idea di Roma. Società, arte e cultura tra Umanesimo e Rinascimento.* A c. di Laura Fortini. Roma: Vecchiarelli, 1993. Pp. 191.**

Il volume trae impulso da un programma collettivo, teso all'"approfondimento di aspetti della vita culturale e sociale a Roma tra i primordi dell'Umanesimo e gli anni del Rinascimento maturo". Tenendo fede all'originario assunto del dibattito di cui reca testimonianza, aperto a sollecitazioni diverse, la raccolta ospita interventi di vario tenore e impegno, accomunati da un prevalente indirizzo storico-filologico. A comunicazioni di taglio per lo più cursorio e informativo, anticipazione di indagini *in fieri*, si affiancano contributi di più solido spessore. La validità dei singoli itinerari di ricerca non riesce tuttavia a rimuovere l'impressione che il proposito,



formulato in esordio da Savarese, di adottare "strumenti educati alla interdisciplinarietà delle metodologie, e attenti alle più fertili tendenze della moderna storiografia letteraria e sociale, artistica e religiosa", non sia stato completamente adempiuto.

La difficoltà, in questa sede, di rendere conto dettagliato dell'ampio spettro di testi e problemi discussi dagli studiosi romani, impone al recensore scelte mirate, e non consente che un referto sommario di alcune testimonianze, a detrimento dell'intenzionale polifonia del progetto editoriale.

Due sono i saggi di carattere storico-artistico accolti nella silloge. Anna Cavallaro esamina un ciclo pinturicchiesco poco noto, sul cui giudizio hanno a lungo gravato errori di attribuzione e sviste cronologiche (*Gli affreschi del Pinturicchio nella palazzina di Giuliano della Rovere ai SS. Apostoli*, 53-71), approdando al riconoscimento dei *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri novem* di Valerio Massimo quale "fonte iconografica" integrativa, accanto al modello liviano, per gli episodi di virtù latina rappresentati nelle scene a monocromo.

Meno puntuale, e guastato da mende tipografiche, lo studio di Sergio Rossi (*In favore di Marcantonio Aquili: alcune osservazioni in margine alla bottega di Antoniazio Romano*, 99-112). Valutando la pratica del laboratorio "di tipo familiare" di Antoniazio Romano, padre di Marcantonio, e concorrenti circostanze di politica religiosa, nonché specifici tratti formali, l'autore propone di assegnare al più giovane Aquili opere finora genericamente ascritte alla bottega paterna.

Di analogo orientamento filologico, applicato però a testi letterari, risulta la nota di Massimo Miglio (*In margine a Lapo da Castiglionchio e Francesco Petrarca*, 1-5), mentre, in termini di disamina culturale, Alda Spotti individua in alcuni lineamenti del carteggio di Mario Maffei (*Le lettere di Martino Virgoletta a Mario Maffei*, 113-20) una "fonte documentaria originale per la storia di Roma negli anni intorno al Sacco del 1527" (114), in equilibrio tra "notizie e considerazioni sulla situazione politica" (117) e note sapide, perfino ironiche, di cronaca locale, affidate al gioco di una spiritosa consuetudine epistolare.

Un quadro epocale complesso, lumeggiato da frammenti di 'vissuto', acquista risalto nella robusta ricognizione di Anna Esposito (*Le Confraternite del matrimonio. Carità, devozione e bisogni sociali a Roma nel tardo Quattrocento*, 7-21). In uno dei più convincenti esempi della sensibilità interdisciplinare e dell'adozione di strumenti correnti invocati in apertura di volume, l'indagine si sofferma su un connotato caratteristico e innovativo delle associazioni filantropiche romane in epoca rinascimentale, "la carità della dotazione". Nell'ambito delle mansioni assistenziali dei sodalizi cittadini, le procedure adottate dalla Confraternita della Minerva rivelano un mutato orientamento, sorto in risposta al variare di assetto sociale. Attraverso la scrupolosa rassegna e interpretazione degli Statuti dell'Annunziata — dei quali, in appendice al saggio (23-51), si fornisce il testo integrale —, la Esposito riconduce a un'oculata strategia l'erogazione dei sussidi dotali, concessi a giovani donne di bassa condizione. Una misura volta a fronteggiare la piaga della prostituzione urbana e taluni effetti nocivi dell'accresciuto flusso immigrativo, ma che detta e sanziona, al contempo, una rigida "morale sessuale". In un intervento pregevole per chiarezza di

analisi e ricchezza di documentazione, nonché confortato da un'aggiornata ed esauriente bibliografia critica, la studiosa vaglia i "superstiti registri" dell'istituto, segnalando differenze nelle categorie beneficiate, nella natura e nell'ammontare dei contributi, e indagando le cause di questi aggiustamenti, anche tramite il confronto con le pratiche di organismi analoghi. La sezione conclusiva della ricerca si appunta sui cerimoniali propagandistici — di massiccio impegno organizzativo e finanziario — elaborati dalle confraternite per pubblicizzare le loro iniziative, e "contemporaneamente per diffondere un preciso messaggio religioso" (17). Nel concepimento di simili 'feste' devozionali, di trama sempre più sofisticata e di forte presa sull'immaginario collettivo, l'"impostazione teologica" — il culto mariano, nel caso dell'Annunziata — impone un crisma dogmatico alla "risposta a un problema sociale", e culmina in celebrazione del consorzio promotore del rito, mediante una ben congegnata, sfarzosa liturgia spettacolare.

Il connubio di formule ecclesiastiche e teatralità rinascimentale viene indagato da Rosanna Alhaique Pettinelli, nel saggio su *La Compagnia del Gonfalone e la "Passione" al Colosseo* (73-98). In area romana, sullo scorcio del Quattrocento e all'inizio del secolo seguente, lo sviluppo della drammaturgia sacra si associa al rigoglio dei sodalizi confraternali e registra il trapasso da una misura intima della fede "a manifestazioni religiose . . . proiettate verso l'esterno e realizzate in una dimensione comunitaria" (74). Come le omologhe esperienze fiorentine, questi allestimenti mirano a diffondere un'elementare istruzione dottrinale, offrendo alla massa dei fedeli meno colti una *biblia pauperum* agita. La decifrazione del fenomeno, intrapresa con lo scrutinio degli statuti societari — i quali, nella circostanza in questione, stabiliscono come "principio e fondamento" della "venerabile compagnia . . . el representare omni anno la Passione del nostro Signore Iesu Christo" (73) —, è agevolata dalla sopravvivenza delle "prime edizioni a stampa del testo" concepito per la messinscena. L'analisi, condotta su un duplice piano di storia interna e locale, dell'attività della Compagnia del Gonfalone — ove si segnala il "nesso . . . tra l'uso pagano del Colosseo e la sua riconsacrazione attraverso la rappresentazione sacra" (79) — prelude all'esame della stesura della Passione "che va sotto il nome di Giuliano Dati". È questa una singolare, industrie figura di letterato, animata da un fervido impegno pastorale e sensibile alle valenze divulgative dell'arte tipografica, prezioso strumento di propagazione del "discorso edificante".

Ben si comprende, quindi, il rilievo conferito, nel copione di sua mano, a quanto "meglio si prestava ad una resa drammatica o alla accentuazione dell'elemento didascalico" (87), tramite un'assidua selezione e saldatura di dettagli dei vangeli canonici, e con l'aggiunta di ingredienti spuri, di sostanza realistica. L'adattamento alla scena del dettato neotestamentario esibisce inoltre, in sottolineature irose e omissioni studiate, un "tono fortemente antiebraico": un connotato caratteristico del Dati, al quale sarà forse da ascrivere anche il testo a stampa della *Resurrezione*, tramato di simili inflessioni.

Un contributo alla definizione della cultura, non soltanto romana, del primo Cinquecento viene offerto da Gennaro Savarese (*Egidio da Viterbo e Virgilio*, 121-

42), che discute un caso eminente del “virgilianismo diffuso” tipico di quest'epoca. L'opera del cardinale viterbese si presenta per più rispetti come paradigmatica, in virtù dei suoi molteplici legami con i circoli intellettuali coevi e del tenore ufficiale di alcuni suoi pronunciamenti. Una triade di *auctoritates* presiede al sincretismo di Egidio, che vede nella lezione del poeta latino un plausibile ed esemplare contemperamento di “parola divina e verbo platonico”. Questa interpretazione si avvale di una “lettura esasperatamente ‘figurale’ dell'Eneide”, che ne riconduce i dettami al presunto modello filosofico, con evidenti forzature, e la trasforma in “una sorta di Sacra Scrittura” (126).

Tale sistema ermeneutico attribuisce una funzione primaria al *topos* dell'età dell'oro, acquisito, in chiave strumentale, ai trionfi del cristianesimo. A garante della strategia revisionistica viene eletto Agostino, che l'esegeta rinascimentale celebra anche come precursore dei suoi interessi di timbro ermetico. Richiamandosi alle indicazioni di Secret, Savarese analizza infine la fase conclusiva della militanza virgiliana del cardinale, testimoniata dall'*Historia viginti saeculorum* e dalla *Sccechina*: all'insegna di una pretesa affinità intima con l'enunciato biblico, si assiste allora al cristallizzarsi degli spunti anteriori in una “versione cabalistica della storia” (142).

Sul rapporto, tutt'altro che pacifico, tra destino soggettivo e temperie culturale si incardina l'articolo di Laura Fortini — *Un umanista mistico e la corte di Roma: Paolo Giustiniani, “uomo tragico” del primo Cinquecento*, 143-66 —, impegnata a ripercorrere l'itinerario spirituale di questa personalità suggestiva, scissa tra un'ambiziosa inclinazione alla solitudine contemplativa e “lo zelo affannato della vita civile” (144). La fisionomia del letterato veneziano appare segnata da un'esigenza di ripiegamento interiore, in chiave di rigorismo religioso, che si esprime dapprima nel ritiro a Murano, poi nell'adesione alla regola camaldolese, e infine nella creazione del nuovo ordine degli Eremiti di San Romualdo. Il divorzio dal commercio sociale e politico matura entro una “concezione di *renovatio* ecclesiastica” intensamente vissuta, in rapporto dinamico con la prassi mondana, suo indispensabile contrappunto. Di qui la dimensione ‘tragica’ che la Fortini — adottando una formula di Blanchot — riconosce alla vicenda esistenziale del Giustiniani, in costante tensione tra i due poli, e alimentata da assidue frequentazioni intellettuali, mai interrotte. Nelle testimonianze epistolari e letterarie, la *fuga mundi* si connota quindi come faticoso e inquieto distacco da circoli di relazioni — la raffinata ma costringente civiltà veneziana e la corte pontificia — che non mancano di esercitare una potente seduzione (decisiva, ad esempio, per il Quirini, turbato da analoghe ansie speculative, eppure conquistato alla causa romana). Di contro al richiamo del secolo, la ricerca della “vera humana felicità” trae vigore dalla scontroso, fervida visione, talora imputata a spirito “malinconico”, della realtà contigua come “aliena”, e dal perseguimento della “vera patria, non terrena, ma celeste” (164).

L'ambiente cortigiano fuggito dal Giustiniani, in quanto ‘luogo’ ostile a una sincera vocazione mistica, è al centro delle attenzioni di Nicoletta Pellegrino, nel saggio che chiude la serie (*Tutti gli uomini del Papa: le istruzioni di Ercole Gonzaga al*



*nipote*, 167-82). Gli *Avvertimenti* stilati per Cesare Gonzaga dallo zio, il cardinale Ercole — guida illuminata negli intrichi della diplomazia romana —, funzionano da traccia privilegiata di una rapida ma penetrante lettura della “prattica” curiale. La prospettiva etica viene qui rimossa in nome della ‘ragion di stato’, che detta una valutazione duttile e calibrata del gioco di alleanze da coltivare. L’alto dignitario della Chiesa, uscito sconfitto dall’ultima elezione, cerca di preparare il terreno alla propria candidatura nel prossimo conclave, impartendo al nipote direttive minuziose sul contegno da tenere con i principali figuranti di un teatro di scontri sovente dissimulati.

L’intreccio di percorsi critici delineato da questa raccolta di studi si propone dunque come utile mappa di orientamento per chi intenda agganciare la comprensione della Roma umanistica e rinascimentale a circostanze individuate, puntando soprattutto sulle affascinanti e spesso elusive interferenze di storia culturale e ideologia religiosa.

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**Brian Richardson.** *Print Culture in Renaissance Italy: The Editor and the Vernaculat Text 1470-1600*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994. XV + 265.

The work of the editor did not begin during the Renaissance. This function had been recognized since the third century B.C. What was new in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy was the adoption of the standards employed in classical works to works in the vernacular. The implication was that the vernacular was to be considered a worthy emulator of Latin and Greek and that among all the various expressions of the vernacular the primacy should be given to the Trecento Tuscan based on Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. This is the theme of Brian Richardson’s lively, interesting book: the editor and his aims and methods during the Renaissance. The focus centers on Florence and Venice from the second half of the fifteenth century to 1600, especially among the great publishing houses of Aldus Manutius in Venice and the Giuntas in Florence.

The printing press with its run of hundreds or sometimes thousands of copies over wide geographical areas brought new demands on the book market. The printers realized that their publications needed changes to reach as wide an audience as possible. One of the solutions was to care not only about the physical appearance of their output, but also to make them easy to understand and use. The person who played this function was the editor. He was called to improve the works’ readability, to ensure that the edition was complete and accurate, to evaluate the work’s most recent editions, and to render the text understandable to as large an audience as possible. In the long run these requirements helped to establish better texts and

secured the supremacy of the Tuscan over other dialects. Sometimes, however, in the short run, they also led to methods unacceptable to modern scholarship.

The editors were very influential in forcing linguistic and stylistic taste. In their critical interpretation of the text they guided the reader toward certain aspects sometimes at the expense of others and enriched the subject with commentaries, separate glossaries, and appendices. One of their main guidelines emphasized a return to the work's original source. In reality, they followed this approach imperfectly. For instance, the need to standardize the language theoretically meant the supremacy of the Trecento Tuscan masters. In reality, it did not always work this way. First of all, the vernacular which eventually became standard was a combination of the Tuscan speech with new words introduced from Latin and from the variations that the language had undergone over a 200-year evolution. Moreover, the need to appeal to readers outside Tuscany or unfamiliar with Tuscan often meant the introduction of local idioms. Finally, the tendency to "improve" on the original meant at times "correction," not preservation of the original. Yet by the end of the sixteenth century, especially through the work of the influential Florentine intellectual Vincenzio Borghini, editing reached a high level of proficiency. Although quite far from modern editing scholarship, Borghini launched the basis of the modern approach to the task.

Richardson begins his analysis in the last three decades of the fifteenth century with the introduction of commentaries and indices for Dante and Petrarch in Venice and with the edition of Dante's *Convivio* and Jacopone da Todi's *Laude* in the 1490s in Florence. Then after an important chapter on Pietro Bembo and on the period 1501-1530 he switches to the Venetian and to the Florentine printing presses in three distinct periods, 1501-1530, 1531-1560, and 1561-1600. His conclusion is that on the whole Venice played a leading function in setting the editor's role especially in the mid years of the sixteenth century when Venetian printing output was superior in quality and quantity to the Florentine presses' output. Yet in the last part of the century this leadership passed to Florence thanks mainly to Borghini's work.

Richardson's book is interesting and timely on a subject practically unknown and only partially understood. Its approach reflects the Renaissance scholarship of the last thirty years — to discard the wide ranging themes and assertions of the past in favor of the period's contribution to particular topics. His conclusions too are within the mainstream — that the Renaissance was a crucial period of humankind. If there is a criticism I have of Richardson's work, it concerns his rather thin select bibliography and his dismissal of the importance of Giovanni Della Casa's editions. None of the works of the Florentine are mentioned in spite of the fact that there were over 20 editions of his Italian works (mainly his *Rime* and *Galateo*) in Florence and Venice from 1538 to 1600 (see A. Santosuosso, *The Bibliography of Giovanni della Casa. Books, Readers and Critics 1537-1975*, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki, 1979, pp. 30-46).

**Francesco Guicciardini. *Consolatoria Accusatoria Defensoria*. Introd. Ugo Dotti. Roma: Laterza, 1993. Pp. 227.**

Laterza presents an update of Roberto Palmarocchi's text (F. Guicciardini, *Scritti autobiografici e rari*, Laterza, Bari, 1936, pp.164-281) of Francesco Guicciardini's three best known autobiographical orations, the *Consolatoria*, the *Defensoria*, and the *Accusatoria*. This new edition is updated with notes to accompany an introduction by Ugo Dotti, which is one of the finest interpretations of Guicciardini to appear in recent years. Guicciardini has long been the subject of interest to political scientists and historians but he has never been given the consideration as a literary figure that he probably deserves. To correct this neglect Dotti's introduction adopts a comparative approach and measures Guicciardini with the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevski's *Brothers Karamazov*, where the subject is deicide, and with Cicero in *De Officiis*, where the subject is regicide. The parallel derives from Guicciardini's worries about being remembered for his role in the destruction of the last republican government in Florence. After the Sack of Rome, the Florentine republican government was preparing charges of malfeasance against Guicciardini because the mercenaries he had charged to defend Clement VII did more damage to the Tuscan countryside than to their Spanish-Imperial enemies. Guicciardini wrote these three orations in 1527 to himself in the role of friend, enemy and advocate, in preparation for his legal defense. They are a chilling example of a master advocate's ability to propose three versions of one truth. Guicciardini never intended these works for publication and as such they are an invaluable peek into the mind of power of his day.

Guicciardini's view combined a belief in meritocracy with a Savonarolian fatalism in the defense of the self as the last definable bastion in times of chaos. The retreat into maintaining personal honor above all seems logical, but it was collectively unsuccessful precisely because of its incapability to harness humankind's less materialistic talents. These talents Dotti defines as the *spirito critico*, the human ability to be skeptical of materialistic mindsets such as those of the Grand Inquisitor, or Guicciardini. In a break with the last several decades of criticism Dotti also largely agrees with De Sanctis regarding Guicciardini's reputation. "Quel suo [De Sanctis] giudizio e quella sua severa condanna noi li riteniamo giustificati, anche se per ragioni diverse dalle sue e, forse, più precise" (73). De Sanctis's 1869 condemnation of Guicciardini's character in his essay "L'uomo del Guicciardini" (a title which Dotti shares in his introduction) came at a time when Guicciardini's cold realism was unfashionable in a Risorgimental Italy euphoric with patriotism and hopes for unification. De Sanctis suspected that Guicciardini's cruel truths were so overwhelming that they might be self-inflicted and this moralistic attack dominated criticism for generations. Scholars in recent generations have been wary of De Sanctis's Romantic moralism and overt nationalism. Dotti, however, supports De Sanctis's conclusions in a manner which has been absent from criticism perhaps since Antonio Gramsci's pre-war comments



(Gramsci, *Note sul Machiavelli*, Torino: Einaudi, 1966, pp. 85-87). The title of this collection of orations, "Autodifesa di un politico," also has a clear urgency for an Italy that periodically experiences the type of political upheavals that were the main drama of Guicciardini's life. Dotti confirms that "la nostra cronaca politica attuale . . . non consentirebbe di sbarazzarci tanto agevolmente di tale 'moralismo'" (72).

Dotti also dedicates a chapter to political questions and ideological disputes between Guicciardini and Machiavelli. The two debated the value of republican Rome and oligarchic Venice as model, and the efficacy of historical examples in general. These contrasts are part of a basic philosophic divergence between Machiavelli's idealism and Guicciardini's skepticism. Dotti also examines tangents on Guicciardini's mistrust of plebeian militia and democracy, and the role of fortune and merit (virtue) in human conduct. Here Dotti confirms and adds to what has been described by Gennaro Sasso, Felix Gilbert, Ugo Spirito and others in comparisons of Machiavelli and Guicciardini.

Carlo Celli, *University of Georgia*

**Pamela Joseph Benson. *The Invention of Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1992. Pp. 325.**

Since Ruth Kelso's 1956 discussion on books of conduct for Renaissance women in *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*, scholars have become increasingly interested in determining how to read these texts, written in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Pamela Benson claims that her work is "the first substantial discussion of the majority of these texts" and her attempt to bring "all of them into relationship with each other" (7) fills a void in the critical reading of these texts.

The eleven chapters of the book, preceded by an Introduction, include five chapters on the Italian texts and the remaining on the English, with several cross-references throughout. Benson argues that most of these "profeminist" texts are really exercises in paradox and, although they criticize the assumption of women's inferiority, they are ultimately defenses of the status quo. Benson claims that the independent woman was generally seen as a threat to male dominance by these authors and several of these texts are ultimately self-defenses against women's empowerment.

Beginning with a discussion of *De mulieribus claris*, Benson emphasizes the ambiguity of Boccaccio's work in its presentation of both views on women's strength and weakness. According to Benson, in order to be genuinely "feminist," the text lacks the author's explicit encouragement to contemporary young women to learn from the examples of the illustrious women of the past. A close reading of the

text, in fact, reveals the author's attempt to limit the field of action for modern women to the moral arena.

Among the first Italian defenses of women, Benson examines the unpublished manuscripts *De laudibus mulierum* (1487) by Goggio and *Defensio mulierum* (c. 1501) by Strozzi, both in Italian despite the Latin titles. While the authors challenge the conventional notion of women, they definitively prefer the ethical woman to the strong one and never consider any change in society's structure. In her consideration of Flavio Capella's *Della eccellenza e dignità della donna* (1525), the first published defense in Italy, Benson shows its similarities to Agrippa von Nettesheim's praise of women and its strong profeminist stance in the affirmation that custom and not nature has made women inferior to men. As if to counteract this statement, however, the text also claims that women's virtues, such as their goodness and meekness, condemn them to social inferiority.

According to Benson, Castiglione's *Il cortegiano* (1528) presents most of the points of both sides of the discussion on the nature and role of women and resolves the conflict between the two by defining the *donna di palazzo*. As Benson and other scholars have noticed, by defining women in terms of a (enclosed) place rather than in relation to a social system, the author never challenges the social premises of gender differences. Benson argues that Castiglione distorts the notion of women's autonomy by pretending that the women themselves decide to keep silent, refuse to act or entitle men to speak up in their defenses against misogynist attacks. Valeria Finucci in *The Lady Vanishes* agrees with this view by noticing that Castiglione makes women agree to the explanation that their non-participation is to their personal advantage (19).

Benson dedicates two thirds of the section on Italian defenses of women to a close examination of the debate on women in Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. She sees Bradamante as the heroine of Ariosto's text as she represents the female partner in a new form of male/female relationship based on love and mutual knowledge. Benson argues that Ariosto's solution to the threat of the independent woman is Bradamante's final metamorphosis into an anxious bride, spectator of Ruggero's martial exploits. Ultimately the status quo in male/female relationships remains unchallenged. Benson claims, however, that Ariosto's text succeeds at condemning a misogynist view of love in which man's desire is shown as selfish and conceived solely for man's pleasure. Benson examines three episodes in the epic which highlight Ariosto's position vis-à-vis the debate over women's chastity and men's or society's right to expect or demand it. These episodes confirm the author's interest in the issue of regulating women's sexuality and his preference for self-reliant women who defend their chastity themselves, such as Isabella, Bradamante and Marfisa. According to Benson, Ariosto, like his predecessors, sees the solution to the war between the sexes not in the advancement of women's social and political status but in a shift in men's perception of women as individual beings, rather than mere sexual objects.

In the second part of Benson's work, worth mentioning are her examination of the general traits of the English defenses of women, as well as her comparison of

Spenser and Ariosto's notions of women's role in society. Generally the English defenses are conservative apologies of women, presenting purity and chastity as women's primary virtues, while avoiding to consider their social and political roles.

Among the texts Benson considers are Thomas More's letters and epigrams depicting the author's primary concern about women's spiritual well-being and Thomas Elyot's *The Defence of Good Women*. Although this latter text had no effect in the controversy about women's social role, some of its ideas were to influence Spenser. According to Benson, this defense, like the others, uses rhetorical strategies to ultimately contain the independent woman.

Interesting and exhaustive is Benson's treatment of Spenser's reworking of Ariosto's text on the topic of womankind in *The Faerie Queene*. The differences in the description of the women warriors they introduce reflect the two authors' different notions of women's roles. While Ariosto's Bradamante places her excellence in her similarity to and competition with men, thus demanding to be judged by her actions rather than by her sex, Britomart insists on her difference from men and her private quest for a husband, at times interrupted by military endeavors. Spenser, anxious to defend Queen Elizabeth's rule, makes chastity the basis of women's power as well as the private manifestation of justice, thanks to the Platonic thesis of the continuity of virtues. Benson records Spenser's description of Britomart's gradual awakening to sexuality, her renunciation of Amazon-like activities and her acceptance of her role as wife and companion-at-arms to her husband. The apparent lack of tension between Britomart's private and public roles urges Benson to judge Spenser's notion of women as "superior" to Ariosto's, since the Italian writer ultimately relegates Bradamante to complete passivity in the public domain. Both authors, however, avoid discussing seriously the political implications of women's rule: Spenser stresses Britomart's disinterest in a public role, Ariosto presents horrifying examples of matriarchal or Amazonian rule.

Benson's final judgment on these texts is summarized in her comment to Spenser's text: "In the best tradition of all the defenders of womankind whose works we have examined, Spenser uses praise as a method of political containment" (292). Benson's work is remarkable and helpful to any scholar of women's studies and/or of the early modern period. We can now look forward to a scholarly reading of the few defenses of womankind written by women.

Paola Malpezzi Price, *Colorado State University*

**Joseph D. Falvo.** *The Economy of Human Relations. Castiglione's Libro del cortegiano.* New York: Peter Lang, 1992. Pp. 187.

Joseph Falvo's title refers to the more practical aspects of the *Libro del cortegiano's* idealized world. By analyzing the foundation of economic exchange, power politics,



and mutual interdependence that underlies the text's aesthetic and rhetorical universe, the author effectively demonstrates the complexities of the Renaissance text, in which idealization contains a utilitarian function that mirrors the ideology and socio-political realities of Castiglione's day. Following the work of Greenblatt, Falvo views the courtier as the ideological product of power relations within his society. As the heir of a long intellectual and courtly legacy the *Cortegiano* reaches back to the ancients' definition of *virtus* while incorporating the qualities of popular courtesy books and historical encomiums. In Falvo's discussion, the humanist self-fashioning of the courtier is indelibly tied to social necessities and to dependency on a ruler. As the author cogently argues, seen in this light, the *Cortegiano* can be perceived as a "handbook for survival," as related to Machiavelli's *Principe* as to a treatise on kingship.

To stress his point, Falvo carefully reviews the utilitarian implications found in Castiglione's earlier works, notably *Tirsi* and the "Epistola" to Henry VII. A depiction of Guidobaldo that suggests Castiglione's desire for patronage, the epistle is presented as a rhetorical instrument for legitimizing the Montefeltros' dynastic rights, adding a practical dimension to the encomiastic genre. Similarly, setting aside traditional literary interpretations, the dramatic eclogue *Tirsi* is evaluated as an allegorical representation of the "dynamic of power relations" (31) between courtiers (the shepherds) and their princes, both bad (embodied in the "ninfa crudel") and good. Castiglione's own existential experiences are, thereby, rendered symbolically. As for the *Cortegiano*, the author does not ignore the work's literary and memorial aspects, which form the basis of most modern criticism. Rather, Falvo states that Castiglione's interests supercede aestheticism and idealization, being concerned, instead, with the way power is manifested aesthetically. Proposing the juncture of painting and writing, Falvo is particularly intrigued by the book as an *istoria* connected to both the classical tradition and renaissance Humanism: connections which are carefully drawn and explicated.

Like a Cinquecento colorist, the writer/painter Castiglione richly illustrates the environment and protagonists of Urbino, dispensing fame through his eloquent portrait. Within his depiction, the court's game becomes a serious representation of complex social activities which subsume issues of behavior, discourse, and community. The game's goal is the construction of a "form" through appropriate discourse. As has often been shown, the courtier is a carefully refined construction, in which appearance is essential to function and meaning. In short, he too is a work of art. As an image-maker, a master of "figurative masking" (77), the proposed gentleman is needfully conscious of his audience. According to Falvo, the goal of self-fashioning, however, is not the development of a single model but the creation of a well-informed class of men, a new form of elite who can guide and direct princes in achieving a stable and happy state. Falvo proposes that the *Cortegiano* is essentially a handbook for courtiers. Its subject is *cortegianeria*, a form to be mastered by the individual so that he can embody the collective's value system while reflecting his entire class of cohorts. Even the discussion of language is uncovered as

utilitarian: an interregional tongue is endorsed as a means of harmonization and culturalization.

In Castiglione's depiction of Renaissance courts, Falvo argues that both prince and courtiers must be Protean figures. The author emphasizes the paradoxical nature of the courtier's role and self-representation: befitting a man who is simultaneously ornamental and instrumental. To underscore this point and confirm the constructed nature of the courtier, the antithesis of *sprezzatura* and *affettazione* forms a recurring motif of this book. Among peers, the *mediocrità* resulting from the appropriate manipulation of *sprezzatura* forestalls aggression and animosity through self-control, thereby protecting the courtier. This point highlights the issue of "economy" at the core of this book. Falvo's argument is innovative, complex, and convincing, resulting in an enticingly realistic approach to *Il libro del Cortegiano*. Richly documented and historically grounded, Falvo's discussion carefully integrates the literature, thought, and rhetoric of the '500, successfully weaving contemporary works by Tassoni, Alamanni, Pontano, and Della Casa, among others, and a vast array of significant modern scholarship, into his argument. The volume's one flaw is a noticeable inconsistency in providing English translations of Latin, Italian, and French quotations.

Fiora A. Bassanese, *University of Massachusetts-Boston*

**Alison Brown.** *The Medici in Florence. The Exercise and Language of Power.* Firenze: Leo S. Olschki and Perth: U of Western Australia, 1992. Pp. xiii + 356.

This is a collection of nine research articles and three review articles published between 1961 and 1992, all but two appearing in the 1980s and 1990s. They focus on Florence between 1434, when Cosimo de' Medici became "first citizen" of the city, and 1494, when the Medici were driven from power. The three review-articles discuss a good number of recent publications on Florence, Coluccio Salutati, and Machiavelli.

The first article pursues the humanistic praises of Cosimo de' Medici through three generations of humanists, including Florentines and outsiders, establishment figures and impecunious poets seeking positions. The first generation praised Cosimo as "the leading citizen of a free republic," the second lauded him for his patriotism, republicanism, and for encouraging learning. The third generation saw him as a combination of Maecenas, Augustus, and philosopher-king. First published in 1961, this article is very badly written. It lacks topic sentences, overuses the passive voice, and abounds in 80-word sentences with numerous confusing subordinate clauses. Fortunately, the author learned to write by 1979, the date of the second oldest piece.

The second article discusses Cosimo's wit and wisdom, i.e., how admirers and publicists emphasized his pithy one-liners and dry humor. Brown shows how the image of Cosimo as a plain-spoken citizen, almost a man of the people, developed. But no off-color jokes are attributed to Cosimo. Brown tends to see this picture of Cosimo as true-to-life, a belief which is difficult to document. The third article deals with the life of Pierfrancesco de' Medici (1430-76), a nephew of Cosimo. Brown chronicles the growing split in the Medici extended family through Pierfrancesco and his sons. The heavy-handed paternalism and tendency to use as its own the shared family wealth by the ruling line led to an open split. Pierfrancesco's descendants sided with the enemies of the Medici in 1494.

Other articles deal with how the Medici drew the teeth of the Parte Guelfa, an historically powerful opposition body, and how Lorenzo il Magnifico used an administrative body to reform the Monte Commune (funded public debt) to his own profit. The theme of language returns with a study of Platonism, which Brown sees as playing a key role in legitimizing the Medici and princely rule generally in Milan, Mantua, Ferrara, and Urbino. It is a good, provocative piece which should stimulate more research. In another study, she shows that, in contrast to the image of the Platonic philosopher-ruler preferred by Lorenzo, Savonarola likened himself to Moses, the prophet, disciplinarian, and lawgiver. She argues that this is the background to Machiavelli's use of Moses in his writings. The most important of the review articles is the look at Hans Baron's two volumes of articles (published in 1988) which turns into an appreciative retrospective analysis of one of the century's most influential Renaissance historians.

Overall, these are good articles thoroughly based on original archival and manuscript sources, often with documentary and textual appendices. They show in concrete ways how the Medici consolidated power and how Lorenzo il Magnifico manipulated the levers of government in order to assert his authority and to fatten his purse. In the debate over the extent and nature of Medici rule, she argues that one should not exaggerate their power. They were rulers, but not absolutist princes, even though Lorenzo laid the financial basis for the early modern principate. The articles on language document how descriptive imagery helped to consolidate their power.

The articles merit reprinting, because they provide useful information and elucidate themes with coherence. When articles are collected into a volume which is freshly typeset, as this one is, the author must make a decision. Should s/he reprint them as originally published, or should they be rewritten in order to take into account new scholarship and to eliminate mistakes? (The question does not arise when the articles are reproduced photographically; then the author cannot rewrite, but only append new bibliography and a list of corrections.) Since Brown says nothing on this, the reader must figure it out for himself. Brown has repeated the original articles. She has added a very limited amount of new bibliography to the notes without making textual changes.

This limits the book's usefulness somewhat. The first article would have profited from inclusion of material from Arthur Field's book (1988) and several articles on



Platonism and the Medici, the University of Florence at mid-century, and the teaching of John Argyropoulos and Cristoforo Landino, all matters discussed in the article. The article on Platonism does not mention either Field's book or James Hankins' *Plato in the Renaissance* (1990). The article on the Parte Guelfa notes, but does not use, Diane Finiello Zervas' book (1988) on that subject.

The volume also repeats the careless mistakes of the original articles. In 1473 (not 1475) most of the University of Florence moved to Pisa, which was not quite the same as the "reestablishment of the University of Pisa" (35). On p. 221, note 14, both titles listed (Charles Schmitt's article and David Marsh's book) are incorrectly given. Indeed, there are several examples of inaccurate, garbled, and/or incomplete titles of articles and journals in this volume. Brown does not even give complete citations for her own articles reprinted in the book.

Of course, it is very hard for an author to revise what was written ten, twenty, and thirty years ago, and it is legitimate to republish without revisions. But the author has an obligation to inform the reader of the policy followed. And at the minimum, the mistakes should have been corrected.

Paul F. Grendler, *University of Toronto*

**Antonio Daniele. *Linguaggi e metri del Cinquecento*. Rovito (Cosenza). Marra Editore. 1994. Pp. 344.**

A circa dieci anni dalla preecedente racco]ta di saggi, dedicata a un autore del quale Antonio Daniele può essere considerato uno specialista (*Capitoli tassiani*, Padova, Anlenore, 1983), egli ha ora riunito i suoi più recentl sondaggi approntati per un periodo tra i più fecondi, e conseguentemente più frequentati, della storia lefteraria e della lingua italiane, quel XVI seco]o cui appartiene anche Torquato Tasso, ma che — dall'irruzione del dialetto alle contemporanee normative bembesche e alla nascita della questione della lingua — si differenzia dai secoli precedenti di formazione del canone, precludendo alla stabilizzazione della lingua letteraria italiana che si è verificata nei secoli successivi, salvo le fuoruscite espressionistiche, o comunque libertarie, operate dal filone che si è finito per identificare e designare come "funzione-Gadda".

Nel primo di questi sondaggi, *Note metriche e testuali sulla "Pastorial" e sulla "Betia" del Ruzzante*, viene offerta una campionatura della lingua dei due testi teatrali, guelia "parlata villanesca allo sta[o puro" revisionata da Ruzzante "sotto il duplice aspetto della fonetica e della sintassi", pur mantenendone il carattere dominante di creazione plurilingue nella quale è esaltata la libertà delle associazioni e degli esperimenti, all'interno della tradizione dell'egloga, per la *Pastoral*, e della commedia nuziale o *mariazo*, per la *Betia*, quest'ultima analizzata nelle due successive redazioni (del 1524-25 e del 1526-27), dalla primitiva, più marcatamente frottolistica, alla

seconda, rivista con intenti di riassetto versificatorio.

Nella *Forma del "Chaos"* di Teofilo Folengo è affrontato un testo, tra i più ardui di un autore al quale la sperimentazione linguistica è connaturata e che si misura con la tradizione stilistica illustre del prosimetro (dalla dantesca *Vita nuova* all'*Arcadia* de] Sannazzaro), investendola di intenzioni molteplici e intersecantisi, e in fine contraddittorie, riflesse già nel titolo, che Daniele sintetizza nel "magma artistico e filosofico", oltre che biogratico, del Folengo. Nel *Chaos del Triperuno*, strutturato nelle tre *Selve*, che rimandano alle *Selve d'amore medicee*, ma alludono anche alla libera mescolanza di stili e generi, il richiamo alla divinità trinitaria rimbalza sulla triplice identità di FoLengo, poeta macaronico, poeta toscano e infine rigido anacoreta, che in un dialogo a più voci esibisce i propri errori in funzione di ammaestramento, oscuramente e variamente come una ulteriore "geniale incarnazione di sincretismo linguistico".

Il nome del Trissino è associato al recupero e alla prima edizione, pur se in traduzione italiana, del *De vulgari eloquentia*, ma proprio nello stesso 1529 egli pubblicava le prime quattro divisioni di un trattato storico-descrittivo-strutturale sulle forme poetiche realizzate. Di queste e delle successive, "quinta e sesta divisione", si occupa il saggio *Sulla poetica di Giovan Giorgio Trissino*, mentre il successivo è dedicato all'"invenzione" dell'endecasillabo sciolto, dovuta allo stesso Trissino, che nella "motivazione 'ideologica'" premessa alla *Sofonisba* ne aveva teorizzato l'uso più che adatto allo stile eroico-tragico ("non solamente ne le narrazioni, et orazioni utilissimo, ma nel muover compassione necessario").

Un corposo saggio, circa novanta pagine, su *Teoria e prassi del madrigale libero nel Cinquecento*, occupa la parte centrale della raccolta, permettendo a Daniele di sistematizzare ed esemplificare esaurientemente un componimento poetico — "di raffinata esecuzione, ma in fondo di consumo, al punto da diventare un linguaggio comune, fatto di stereotipi presso tutti i rimatori" — che conobbe, grazie alle *Prose della volgar lingua* del Bembo, una nuova fortuna lungo tutto il XVI secolo, esaltata dalle numerose trascrizioni musicali, che il veneto Andrea Gabrieli applicò anche a testi dialettali. Alla corte di Ferrara, principalmente nei componimenti tassiani, è possibile cogliere "la diffusione di un codice inequivocabile di scrittura e la modellizzazione in atto dei temi e degli stilemi" che maestri come Gesualdo da Venosa e Luca Marenzio vestirono di note.

I due saggi conclusivi ruotano attorno alla poesia del Tasso: il primo letto a un convegno tassiano (Ferrara 1986), il secondo quasi viatico essenziale alla conoscenza del suo universo lirico; pur diversi per mole e destinazione iniziale, entrambi abbondano di letture e comparazioni di testi poetici. Di particolare interesse l'attenzione portata da Daniele al *corpus* delle ottantaquattro canzoni tassiane, "il genere lirico metrico in cui maggiormente si evidenzia la duplice tendenza de] Tasso verso l'innovazione stilistica e insieme la conservazione morfologica", quest'ultima da ascrivere a un iniziale ossequio di petrarchista, superata talvolta non per la felicità inventiva, bensì a favore di una complessità non sempre risolta.

Lungi dal presentarsi come un'opera non omogenea, la raccolta di Daniele

conferma la fedeltà a un settore di studi stilistici, la coesione e concatenazione degli argomenti, la competenza in un lavoro di scavo che procede ad esami di dettaglio e confronti intra- ed intertestuali, volutamente limitando, o relegando in margine, veloci, ma non banali, appunti critici.

Luciano Morbiato, *Università della Calabria*

**Michael Sherberg. *Rinaldo: Character and Intertext in Ariosto and Tasso*. Stanford French and Italian Studies 75. Saratoga, CA: ANMA Libri, 1993. Pp. vii + 209.**

In questo importante volume l'autore si propone di esaminare i vari aspetti che il personaggio di Rinaldo assume non solo presso i due autori indicati nel sottotitolo, ma, più in generale, nella tradizione della letteratura cavalleresca italiana, dai *Cantari di Rinaldo da Monte Albano* all'*Innamoramento di Rinaldo da Monte Albano* al poema del Boiardo e via dicendo; sottolineando innanzi tutto la sua popolarità presso il pubblico del Rinascimento, una popolarità confermata dal cospicuo numero di opere che lo hanno come protagonista (mentre presso i moderni, che pensano soprattutto all'*Innamorato* e al *Furioso*, la sua figura è stata offuscata da quella di Orlando), e che si spiega sulla base degli aspetti fondamentali che lo caratterizzano, in quanto egli rimane "the sort of hero that many would like to be: capable of creating a better world, self-sufficient, important enough to draw others to him", mentre le sue imperfezioni "allow his poets to make him exemplary of a heroism that does not lack human flaws" (196). L'analisi non viene condotta sulla linea dei procedimenti tradizionali, che esaminavano come uno specifico personaggio presentasse lati diversi del suo carattere nelle varie opere in cui appariva, o anche si limitavano essenzialmente solo a mettere in luce quei lati che risultavano più evidenti e che venivano ripetuti più spesso; lo Sherberg tende piuttosto a sottolineare come ogni testo riprenda le linee generali del carattere di Rinaldo rielaborandole in maniera originale e sostanzialmente diversa da quanto era stato fatto in precedenza, e nella sua operazione da un lato si sofferma spesso a illuminare anche personaggi diversi da quello di Rinaldo ed episodi che coinvolgono loro insieme o senza di lui, dall'altro non trascura le connessioni che si possono stabilire fra il comportamento, le azioni e le situazioni in cui si trovano quei personaggi e quelli presenti nella società contemporanea.

La prima parte del volume si rivolge fondamentalmente all'Ariosto; attraverso lo studio del personaggio di Rinaldo vengono chiariti alcuni aspetti dei rapporti fra l'*Innamorato* e il *Furioso* e sottolineati alcuni dei più vistosi cambiamenti operati dall'Ariosto nel riprendere le situazioni prospettate dal Boiardo. Particolare attenzione viene data ai due "viaggi" dell'eroe in Scozia e in Italia (e alle esperienze che egli attraversa in quei luoghi, esperienze che presentano varie analogie ma che



conducono il personaggio a comportamenti affatto diversi, soprattutto perché nel corso del primo egli è dominato dal sentimento di amore, mentre durante il secondo non lo è più) e al suo rapporto con Dio e con il mondo cristiano in relazione alla sua passione per Angelica. In generale lo Sherberg si rivela sempre molto attento a stabilire rapporti interni fra vari testi e fra vari episodi dello stesso testo e ad identificare precisi significati allusivi che un autore perseguirebbe intenzionalmente nella propria opera e nel riferire situazioni e momenti di opere precedenti, anche dove si potrebbe pensare che fossero solo il gusto e il piacere stesso insiti nella narrazione a guidarlo e a condizionarlo. Forse l'unico rilievo che gli si potrebbe fare è quello di forzare a volte il testo per ricavarne quanto gli torna utile per il suo discorso: così ad esempio, nell'analisi dei rapporti fra Gradasso, Rinaldo e Baiardo (19-21), non ci sembra il caso di mettere sullo stesso piano la *queste* del primo per il cavallo del secondo (alla quale egli rinuncia nel settimo canto del primo libro dell'*Innamorato*, in conseguenza dell'esser stato vinto in duello da Astolfo) con quella per la spada di Orlando, sulla quale sia il Boiardo che l'Ariosto ritornano varie volte; o a proposito della caduta di Adamo di cui Rinaldo parla nel *Furioso* (43.8), non si può trascurare il fatto che, nella pronuncia italiana, sussiste una precisa differenza fra "tómo", che significa appunto "caduta", e "tòmo", che significa "parte" di un libro, mentre per lo Sherberg i due termini sarebbero facilmente intercambiabili (71). Ma in questo tipo di analisi, anche se non sempre risulta chiaro che cosa intenda l'autore con certe affermazioni e non sempre se ne possano accettare le implicazioni e le conclusioni (così, ad esempio, a proposito del riconoscimento che "almost all the *Furioso*'s characters move about constantly" [43], non è questo forse altrettanto vero per pressoché tutti i personaggi della letteratura cavalleresca, dai tempi della *Tavola ritonda* e dell'*Entrée d'Espagne*, dove Orlando, nonostante il titolo e l'argomento del poema, finisce in Oriente?), è il caso di sottolineare che lo Sherberg mette in luce in maniera precisa e puntuale particolari sui quali la critica precedente non si era soffermata abbastanza o aveva considerato irrilevanti, mentre verisimilmente non lo sono; come quando scrive che i due viaggi di Rinaldo in Scozia e in Italia "make up nearly uninterrupted narrative sequences" (44), cosa abbastanza inconsueta nella struttura del poema, soprattutto nella prima metà.

Nella seconda parte del volume l'autore, dopo aver lamentato la scarsa attenzione data dalla critica al poema giovanile del Tasso, si sofferma innanzi tutto sulla situazione culturale italiana del periodo in cui nacque il *Rinaldo*, sulle posizioni prese dal poeta nei confronti delle polemiche, originate soprattutto in relazione al *Furioso* e al suo successo, circa i rapporti fra epica e romanzo e altri problemi di vario genere (l'uso dell'ottava, l'uso della rima, l'unità e l'*entrelacement*, l'uso dei proemi e via dicendo); sottolinea il problema centrale che il Tasso affronta in quest'opera, il rapporto fra onore e amore per cui il protagonista deve provare la sua dignità di cavaliere e di eroe prima di giungere al matrimonio con la donna che ama; analizza i rapporti fra l'episodio di Floriana e la fonte principale da cui deriva, quello di Didone nell'*Eneide*, non senza diversi echi di quello di Alcina con Ruggiero nel *Furioso*, mettendo in evidenza come, nonostante le intenzioni proclamate nella lettera

introduttiva del poema, il Tasso non riesca a staccarsi completamente dall'esempio del romanzo per seguire in maniera uniforme e costante quello dell'epica. Successivamente, partendo dalle osservazioni di vari critici che hanno rilevato somiglianze ideali fra il giovane autore e il protagonista del poema, lo Sherberg indugia a esaminare in che senso il *Rinaldo* possa essere considerato autobiografico. Qui forse a volte il discorso si complica inutilmente: troppo preso dalla ricerca di possibili significati freudiani, dalla volontà di presentare un Rinaldo che non riesce a stabilire la certezza di chi, fra Amone di Chiaramonte e Ginamo di Baiona, sia veramente suo padre, l'autore trascura di segnalare che eventuali infrazioni al racconto dell'*Innamoramento di Rinaldo* possono risalire semplicemente ad altre imitazioni (così la confessione finale di Ginamo riecheggia quella di Polinesso nella novella di Ariodante e Ginevra nel *Furioso*, e il giuramento di Rinaldo di non usare spada se non conquistandola in duello a un guerriero famoso non fa che ripetere la situazione di Mandricardo, prima a proposito delle armi in genere, poi, dopo che ha vinto quelle di Ettore, specificamente di Durindana, nei primi due canti del terzo libro dell'*Innamorato*). Meglio convince lo Sherberg quando si sofferma sui rapporti di Torquato con il padre e con il suo *Amadigi*, mettendo in evidenza quanto di letterario e di tradizionale ci sia nel modo in cui il poeta presenta sé stesso (come Boccaccio, come Ariosto) in contrasto con Bernardo che voleva avviarlo agli studi legali, e quale sia stata la funzione concreta di quest'ultimo nella pubblicazione del poema — mentre ambigui rimangono i sentimenti di Torquato nei confronti dell'opera paterna. Infine viene analizzato il personaggio di Rinaldo nella *Liberata* (che diventerà Riccardo nella *Conquistata*), attraverso l'esame delle affermazioni che lo riguardano nelle *Lettere poetiche* del '75-'76, quali la scelta del nome stesso, la sua relativa storicità e le sue derivazioni dall'Achille omerico, e quanto il Tasso operò per giustificarsi e per difendersi dalle accuse che gli venivano mosse riguardo il poema. L'indagine si sofferma quindi su "the parallel relationship between Rinaldo and Goffredo and Rinaldo and Charlemagne" (164) nel senso in particolare del rapporto di autorità — ricollegandosi quindi anche a quanto era stato visto in precedenza circa l'autorità paterna, e di conseguenza a quanto di autobiografico vi sia nel personaggio della *Liberata*. Lo studio segue puntualmente le situazioni dell'uccisione di Gernando e dell'allontanamento di Rinaldo dal campo cristiano, e quindi del suo ritorno, della sua riconciliazione con Goffredo e del suo ruolo nella vittoria finale, in rapporto alle situazioni simili dell'*Innamoramento di Rinaldo* e del poema giovanile, dove analoghe situazioni si erano presentate nei rapporti fra il protagonista e Carlomagno. L'analisi è accurata, precisa e convincente; solo si potrebbe rilevare che, in considerazione di quanto si dice di Achille nelle *Lettere poetiche*, non sarebbe stato inutile tener conto anche dei rapporti che intercorrono fra quest'ultimo e Agamennone nell'*Iliade*.

In conclusione bisogna riconoscere che questo volume merita di essere tenuto presente innanzi tutto perché è la più ampia analisi sinora condotta del *Rinaldo* nella storia della critica tassiana, opera spesso trascurata dagli studiosi della *Liberata*, mentre lo Sherberg dimostra ampiamente quanto importante sia la sua conoscenza per

una più precisa comprensione del capolavoro; ed è firmato da uno studioso che sa bene di che cosa si tratta, dato che ne ha curato recentemente una assai pregevole edizione (uscita nel '90 a Ravenna presso Longo). Ma al di là di questa importanza specifica, non ci possono essere dubbi che questo volume riservi molte piacevoli sorprese a ogni studioso della letteratura cavalleresca italiana in generale e che, nonostante le superficiali incertezze che abbiamo occasionalmente segnalato, porti un contributo non indifferente in un campo nel quale c'è ancora molto da vedere, da esaminare e da approfondire.

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**Jane Tylus. *Writing and Vulnerability in the late Renaissance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1993. Pp. xiii + 307.**

Nei sette capitoli di questo volume l'autrice indaga la concezione e la situazione dell'invulnerabilità e del suo contrario nel mondo del Rinascimento europeo, partendo dalle sue premesse nello stoicismo di Seneca e seguendone gli sviluppi da Petrarca ed Erasmo (nelle interpretazioni, rispettivamente, di Thomas Greene e Mikhail Bakhtin) attraverso una serie di scrittori preoccupati dallo stesso problema pur abbracciando generi letterari diversi, i quali tutti "engage issues of vulnerability involving both the developing personae within the works and the authors beyond them" (7). Variamente legati e condizionati dalle istituzioni di potere per le quali e nelle quali operavano, tali scrittori hanno sviluppato a volte parallelamente, a volte diversamente varie tecniche di difesa (che si riflettono nei loro personaggi e nei loro scritti) per assicurare la propria indipendenza (o invulnerabilità) dalla pressione e dal controllo (che segna la loro vulnerabilità) esercitati da quelle istituzioni.

Su questa linea, nell'enfasi posta dal Cellini in numerose pagine della *Vita* su "the labor value of his work", la studiosa riconosce lo sforzo da parte dell'artista "to rescue his own esteem from the shadow of a mercantile and unworthy patron" quale fu per lui Cosimo I de' Medici (43), mentre nei più tardi *Trattati dell'oreficeria e della scultura* si riflette il suo tentativo di difesa "from the forces of the market . . . by making of the artists themselves a community capable of assessing its own worth" (53); un tentativo analogo a quello di Teresa d'Avila, che nella sua autobiografia spirituale, *Las moradas*, scritta subito dopo le difficili esperienze con il tribunale dell'Inquisizione nel 1575, cerca la conferma di sé stessa "in a community of women shaped by and within the writings of the New Testament that she was forbidden to read" (55). Centrale nell'*Aminta* e nella *Liberata* è per la Tylus l'intento del Tasso di celebrare, rispettivamente, "the beneficence of the Este court and the unity of the church following the Council of Trent" (80), ma vi traspare allo stesso tempo un'oscillazione fra il riconoscimento che "his desires for purity and protection within sixteenth-century institutions are contaminated, and the possibility that he might be



able to transcend the corruptions of his environments to become the invulnerable spokesperson not of an earthly institution but of a divine authority, God" (82); mentre Spencer, riprendendo da lui e da Virgilio il modello pastorale, "associates [vulnerability] with those directly affiliated with the court . . . , an affiliation that he necessarily shares" (114). Con Shakespeare, soprattutto nei drammi romanzeschi dell'ultimo periodo (scritti alcuni anni dopo che Giacomo I aveva stabilito il patronato reale su tutte le compagnie teatrali), e in particolare in *The Winter's Tale*, assistiamo al tentativo "to relocate the ethical legitimacy for which he must depend on his prince in a source of authority over which the monarch has no control" (146); con Corneille infine, nelle due versioni di *Le Cid*, nella polemica con l'Académie française e negli scritti teorici, si avverte "the aggressiveness of a subject trying to situate himself beyond legitimate spheres of rivalry and legitimation", quali i salotti e i circoli della corte di Parigi (176).

Forse il limite più evidente dello studio della Tylus consiste nella sua pretesa di stabilire che "there were not one but several Renaissances, and that the late Renaissance radically departed from the epochs that preceded it" (7) — concetti per altro non certo nuovi per il pubblico dei rinascimentalisti, dato che da lungo tempo la monolitica interpretazione di un Jacob Burckhardt è stata frammentata e sfaccettata — attraverso l'esame di un aspetto che, per quanto si possa considerare centrale e rilevante, non è in ultima analisi l'unico o quello definitivo per giungere ad una interpretazione globale del movimento analizzato in tutto il suo contesto europeo; un limite che diventa tanto più sostanziale in quanto tale aspetto viene considerato attraverso l'opera di una serie di scrittori che, pur accettando che essi siano "exemplary of the period rather than unique" (30), non sono certo i soli a caratterizzare l'epoca che va dal Concilio di Trento all'ascesa di Luigi XIV. Nonostante la vastità della lista delle "Works Cited" che abbraccia quasi venticinque pagine (275-99), basta sfogliare l'indice dei nomi per chiedersi come si possa definire tale epoca trascurando o ignorando del tutto, nel contesto italiano, autori quali Campanella, Bruno, Galilei e Marino, o, in maniera più globale, tutto il secolo d'oro della letteratura spagnola. Ma al di là di tale e di altre consimili riserve - che la studiosa dal canto suo non sembra prevedere e non aiuta in nessun modo a risolvere, dato che manca affatto nel volume un qualsiasi tentativo di spiegare e di motivare i criteri che l'hanno indotta alla scelta degli scrittori presi in considerazione e all'esclusione degli altri - è innegabile che il lavoro della Tylus, risultato di lunghe meditazioni e ripensamenti su quegli autori e sui critici che li hanno studiati, arricchisca non poco il panorama degli studi sul Rinascimento e sul Barocco, illuminandone vari lati, presentando delle prospettive assai suggestive, e indicando una via che può guidare a futuri approfondimenti anche per gli scrittori che non hanno trovato posto in queste pagine.

**Tomaso Garzoni.** *Le vite delle donne illustri della scrittura sacra.* Ed. Beatrice Collina. Ravenna: Longo, 1994.

Beatrice Collina's edition of Garzoni's *Le vite* is a significant contribution to the ongoing project aimed at making the works of this indefatigable encyclopedic writer of the late Renaissance better known to the general scholarly public. Paolo Cherchi's revised edition of Garzoni's *Opere* preceded *Le vite* by a year, and an unabridged edition of Garzoni's *magnum opus*, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (1585), edited by Cherchi and Collina, is scheduled to come out this fall.

Garzoni was born in 1549 near Ravenna, and at a young age became a canon regular of the Lateran Congregation. Although his profession as Counter-Reformation preacher is reflected stylistically and ideologically in all of his works, the 1586 *Le vite delle donne illustri della scrittura sacra* (the full title of which continues: *Con l'aggiunta delle vite delle donne scure e laide dell'uno e l'altro Testamento. E un Discorso in fine sopra la nobiltà delle donne*) is his only work to treat, in its entirety, explicitly religious material. *Le vite* is composed of narratives of the lives of New and Old Testament women intended to serve as universal moral examples for female behavior. Each biography includes a "prologue" in which the etymology of the protagonist's name and her principal attributes are reviewed, references to contemporary historical (or mythological) events that serve to situate the story chronologically, including the principal events of her life, and an "epilogue" in which the author passes his definitive moral judgment on her (35). Garzoni's is the first such biographical work to limit itself to Biblical women, and thus distinguishes itself from the better known examples of this genre, such as Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*.

In her illuminating introduction of over sixty pages, Collina situates *Le vite* and the *Discorso* in a number of contexts: Garzoni's own literary *corpus*, the traditions of the *exempla*, hagiographic and biographical genres (specifically on women), the Counter-Reformation discussions on how the Bible should be read and, in particular, on the style and content of sermons (of which Garzoni's stories have the flavor), and, with regard to the *Discorso*, the *querelle des femmes*. Garzoni sticks very closely to the Vulgate in his storytelling; almost without exception he steers clear of the medieval tradition of allegorical interpretation of Biblical figures, respecting the Counter-Reformation dictates of simplicity and "pastoral intent." His originality lies principally in the amplification of episodes, which in the Scriptures are for the most part peripheral, and on which he "opera tagli, sintesi, raccordi di materiali a volte lontani fra loro, e li dispone in modo da restituire un raccordo tematicamente omogeneo e perfettamente autonomo" (50), as well as in the "aura di fiaba" and "registro cortese" (49) he superimposes on his material. Garzoni, in fact, in all of his works was one of the most representative exponents of, as Collina puts it, the "cut-and-paste" technique common to many late Cinquecento authors. What interests us today is not so much the "raw materials" of his various texts, which consist primarily

of "borrowings" from the most disparate sources, as the "poetics of rewriting" (13) that he employs in the arrangement of these materials according to his specific ideological purposes.

Who, then, are Garzoni's women? The author effects a "manichean division" between good and bad women, offering the reader little more than "stereotipi privi di sfumature e di spessore psicologico" whose purpose is not so much "di descrivere donne reali, quanto quello di incasellare ciascuna in uno schema inequivocabilmente positivo o negativo" (25-26). Most of the thirty-five "donne illustri" respect the conventional female precepts of silence, chastity, and obedience (as daughter, sister or wife), and their sphere of action is generally limited to the private space of the house. Many women are defined as virtuous merely by the fact that they have famous male relatives: Sarah, for example, is characterized as "in tutti i peregrinaggi obediante alle voglie del marito" and "d'una rara fede e singolare amore" (91). On the other shore, "donne laide" like Delilah, Jezebel and Athaliah have active roles in the public arena. But there are, as Collina points out, some ambiguities in Garzoni's strict classification. Both groups of women include examples of extraordinary physical beauty and sensuality, which Garzoni plays up with a Mannerism "attinto alle arti figurative" (53). Moreover, the few positively portrayed and very public "donne forti, eloquenti e autorevoli" (28) that do frequent his pages (Deborah, the queen of Sheba, Judith), when they are not presented as examples of male souls in a female body, obliquely question the moral ideal of acquiescent domestic virtue. And it is in the portrayals of the "donne laide," who use language as a "strumento di seduzione e persuasione," that Garzoni stages his own rhetorical prowess: their eloquence "altro non è che un'estensione ai personaggi delle abilità oratorie dell'autore" (51), suggesting an intimate fascination of the author with them.

The *Discorso*, a short treatise in praise of women, has as its principal source an enormously influential work in the *querelle des femmes* that swept Cinquecento Europe, the German humanist Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim's 1529 tract *De praecellentia et nobilitate foeminei sexus*, whose author maintains that, although there are biological differences between the sexes, "uomini e donne sono portatori degli stessi valori e degli stessi attributi spirituali, essendo stati creati per uno stesso fine" (70). But Garzoni's recasting of this text, although it does offer a vision of female equality in contrast with the portrayal of women as inferior beings that appears in, for example, *La Piazza*, is essentially "una sintesi opportunamente purgata di tutte le parti più scabrose e ambigue" (70) of the earlier work. Moreover, although from its title Garzoni's tract may seem to have much in common with a work such as Torquato Tasso's *Discorso della virtù femminile, e donnesca*, published only four years earlier, the intents of the two authors are at opposite poles: Garzoni's woman is an "abstract concept," whereas Tasso's woman is a distinctly "historical entity" whose abilities "non sono innate, ma si sviluppano con l'esercizio di un ruolo e di un potere" (69). After stating the central thesis of his argument, that "la forma intrinseca [of women] è l'istessa con quella dell'uomo, cioè l'anima," Garzoni does seem to veer toward historicization when he lists some of the "donne



dottissime" of his own time (Vittoria Colonna, Laura Terracina, Laura Battiferra, Tarquinia Molza). But in the last pages he lapses back into the essentializing tendency that characterizes the tract as a whole: "Tacerò io la pietà nativa delle donne? . . . Che rara pudicizia. . . Chi governa la casa più saggiamente delle donne? . . . Chi governa i figliuoli, chi le serve, chi la robba?" (246-47). It is not surprising, in fact, that the final lines of the *Discorso* celebrate not a female, but a male figure, reiterating Garzoni's conviction that the greatest "nobiltà delle donne" lies in honoring a member of the more "illustrious" sex: "che cosa finalmente della . . . Regina del Cielo, fonte di sapienza e specchio di tutte le virtù che sono al mondo? In lei, e per lei, e con lei pongo il desiato fine al discorso della nobiltà di tutto il sesso femminile, a gloria e onore del suo santo sposo, benedetto ne' secoli de' secoli" (247).

It is clear that these works are of significant historical and sociological, if not always literary, interest. *Le vite* not only documents Counter-Reformation reading and preaching practices, but is also an example of a text written specifically for women. That it is a work whose ideal audience is Garzoni's female contemporaries is evidenced not only by textual interpolations of the sort: "Udite, donne, il caso, e stupite dell'audacia sfrenata del femineo sesso!" (225), but also by explicit statements of purpose such as: "Io vorrei . . . poter narrare una minima parte delle lodi che son convenevoli alla gran regina delli Etiopi, la cui vita ora propongo alle signore e prencipesse cristiane come specchio lucidissimo alli occhi loro" (138-39), or "vengo a porre in iscritto i fregi e le note delle donne oscure e vili dell'uno e l'altro Testamento volendo . . . persuadere alle donne di nostra età la strada della virtù" (205). In a period when the reading public was expanding at a rapid rate, that witnessed a "rivoluzione nel rapporto delle donne con la lettura, e quindi con il sapere" and in which "nuovi quesiti si affacciano sulla scena dell'educazione femminile" (64-65), treatises such as Garzoni's had an important prescriptive function. Finally, both *Le vite* and the *Discorso* are contributions (albeit in a category of their own) to the ongoing *querelle des femmes*. But far from seriously questioning conventional constructions of women, as did his predecessor and source Agrippa and as would do in even more radical fashion women polemicists such as Lucrezia Marinelli and Moderata Fonte, who published, respectively, their *La nobiltà e l'eccellenza delle donne* and *Il merito delle donne* barely a generation later, Garzoni's works represent a desperate attempt to reimpose rigid categorizations on a world in flux.

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*The Sense of Marino. Literature, Fine Arts and Music of the Italian Baroque.* Ed. Francesco Guardiani. New York: Legas, 1994. Pp. 550.  
*Studi secenteschi* 34 (1993). Pp. 474.  
*Studi secenteschi* 35 (1994). Pp. 284.

Il volume curato da Francesco Guardiani, *The Sense of Marino. Literature, Fine Arts and Music of the Italian Baroque*, e alcuni tra i più interessanti contributi apparsi nelle annate 1993-94 di *Studi secenteschi* trovano il loro punto di incontro sotto il segno del Marino.

La raccolta miscellanea, curata con perizia da Francesco Guardiani, si era configurata inizialmente come nucleo di raccolta degli *Atti* del Convegno canadese del 1993 (il primo mai tenutosi sul Marino). Attraverso un'intensa e meditata evoluzione dei contenuti la raccolta si è gradualmente trasformata in "qualcosa d'altro", in un'opera "pluralistica ed interdisciplinare", divisa in tre sezioni: la prima riguardante in specifico l'*Adone*, la seconda, costellata di raffronti testuali e di questioni teoriche; l'ultima, occupata dal rapporto poesia mariniana/musica.

Apri la disamina l'intervento di Paolo Cherchi, dal titolo "Il re Adone" (9-33). In esso lo studioso, con fine erudizione e taglio critico (confluenti verso molteplici livelli interpretativi) analizza, nel canto XVI dell'*Adone*, il tema del concorso di bellezza "con il quale il protagonista è eletto re di Cipro"; discute la crucialità dell'episodio e le sue "implicazioni estetiche, intellettuali e politiche", concentrate sull'idea della bellezza fisica di Adone; e ricostruisce i tasselli di una tradizione storico-letteraria scarsamente nota (affondante le sue radici nell'antichità classica greco-romana ed oltre) secondo la quale la suprema armonia delle forme costituisce un attributo basilare, associato alla maestà del principe o del re.

Segue l'accurata e limpida indagine di Antonio Franceschetti: "Ancora su Amore e Psiche: la molteplicità delle fonti" (35-52). Per più agevolmente percorrere i sentieri teorici mariniani il critico si concentra su una rilettura della famosa lettera all'Achillini (premessa all'edizione della *Sampogna* del 1620). Alla luce delle idee mariniane — che definiscono la *traduzione* (quale parafrasi ampliata), l'*imitazione* (quale rielaborazione e ulteriore sviluppo dell'idea originale di un altro poeta) e la *contaminatio o furto poetico* (come prelievo giustificato di contenuti utili ai personali fini artistici) — lo studioso rileva come tutti i procedimenti illustrati in teoria siano poi applicati nella pratica scrittoria; laddove, nella "novelletta", il poeta "traduce una fonte, ne imita un'altra, e, al tempo stesso", preleva direttamente materiale da una terza. Si procede poi ad un'esplorazione delle fonti poetiche della "Favola" mariniana; esplorazione che arricchisce ed amplia il numero delle fonti già accertate, aggiungendo i rifacimenti (dal racconto originario) del Boiardo, del Firenzuola e di Niccolò da Correggio.

Nata dalle radici dell'esperienza individuale, elaborata come vivace e sentita difesa di un metodo didattico che non tenda a mutilare lo studio del Marino in troppo rapidi ritmi, è la proposta di Francesco Guardiani: "Gli alti misteri ai semplici profani": A Didactic Approach for l'*Adone*" (53-72). In essa lo studioso insiste sulla

necessità — basilare per chi si accinga a proporre il poema mariniano al pubblico universitario — di aver chiara nella mente "a framework for the reading clearly established"; e indica le coordinate didattiche per uno studio che sottolinei "gli assiomi generali dell'*Adone*", al fine di poi meglio penetrare nei particolari: strategia metodologica, questa, che porta all'emersione di varie questioni ancora irrisolte, quali "size, structure and unity of the poem, as well as the symbolic value of Marino's reshaping classical myth".

Il volume si rivela ricchissimo di interventi che propongono, per il "senso" e gli spazi del poeta napoletano, poliformi chiavi di lettura; tra i contributi che hanno concorso alla sua composizione compaiono i belli: "Tra metrica e retorica: endecasillabi sdruciolati da Boiardo a Marino" (157-177), di Edoardo Fumagalli; "Marino e la morte erotica dell'età barocca" (289-297), di Stefania Buccini; "Non prima ebbe favella che vena: preliminari per un discorso su Marino e Chiabrera" (345-360) di Paolo Fasoli; "Marino e il madrigale attorno al 1602" (361-393) di Alessandro Martini; "Marino and Music: A Marriage of Expressive Rhetorical Gesture" (505-550) di Elisabeth Wright.

Quest'omaggio al Marino, nato anche dal desiderio "di una positiva riconsiderazione della sua figura storica", si rivela, per la qualità e la quantità dei contributi, guida preziosa e imprescindibile non solo allo studio del poeta, ma alle cangianti modulazioni dell'*anima in barocco*.

Passando a *Studi secenteschi*, di un poeta ruotante a suo modo intorno all'orbita mariniana si occupa il saggio che apre il volume 34 (3-60). Nel suo "La Cetra e l'Arpa. Studio su Michelangelo Torcigliani", Edoardo Taddeo fa riemergere dal panorama letterario del Seicento — "continente ancora così poco esplorato" — la vita e parte dell'opera (di cui si riporta un'ampia appendice a fine articolo) del lucchese Michelangelo Torcigliani (1618-1679), citato solo due volte, "tra i fautori del Marino", nel *Seicento* di Belloni, senza che egli ne abbia però fornito "titoli di opere, né dati biografici". Appare così sbazzata a tutto tondo la figura di questo "giovannissimo erudito, accademico degli Incogniti, noto a Roma come "buon poeta", ben inserito, almeno per alcuni anni, nel "clima culturale" di quella che Ezio Raimondi, Franco Croce e Mario Costanzo hanno definito "poetica moderato-barocca". Stimato da alcuni dei suoi più famosi contemporanei quali il Frugoni, Carlo de' Dottori, Ciro di Pers e Giovanni Ciampoli, il Torcigliani fu autore di numerose opere poetiche di vario tema e metro (da menzionare il panegirico *Gryphus purpuratus*, e l'*Eneide maccaronica*, esempio di quel genere che "trovò terreno propizio in area barocca per la sua bizzarria e per la contaminazione di ceppi linguistici diversi"). Si vuole qui particolarmente ricordare la sua singolare "trascrizione dell'*Adone* . . . ridotto in otto canti" che il Taddeo definisce una sorta di "intervento chirurgico-critico". Esso salvava solo il "nucleo principale" del poema, rinunciando "all'enciclopedia mitologica e a gran parte delle divagazioni avventurose". Notevolissima la 'premessa' a questa riduzione. Proseguendo nel suo lavoro di *collage*, infatti, il Torcigliani "riproduce" in essa i passi più importanti di una lettera del Busenello, "indirizzata al Marino", che suona come una "appassionata



difesa" della poetica della meraviglia: "Chi non ammira Vs. non intende di Rime, chi non loda le sue poesie non ha cognizione del buono; chi non le assegna la corona d'alloro sopra tutti i poeti, o è ignorante, o è maligno". Questa adesione senza riserve, se pur fatta per "interposta persona", si rivela assai coraggiosa se si pensi correva l'anno 1635 ("anno delle *Poesie toscane* del Barberini che già dieci anni prima aveva trasferito il suo favore dal Marino al Chiabrera); e se si nota che Torcigliani ha "conservato" nel suo *Adone* 'riveduto e corretto' "quelle sottili allusioni e quei rovesciamenti ideologici (trasferimento di simboli cristiani a valori pagani, centralità di Venere-Cupido che sostituisce il binomio Vergine-Cristo)" che secondo il Pozzi "erano stati i veri motivi della . . . condanna all'Indice" dell'opera mariniana nel 1624; condanna "confermata nel '25 e nel '26".

Di squisita e piana natura filologica il saggio di Massimo Danzi: "Il Bembo di Alessandro Tassoni e la filologia modenese del secondo Cinquecento", nel volume 35 di *Studi secenteschi* (3-56). In esso si discute del "fortunato recupero sul mercato antiquario dell'esemplare delle *Prose della volgar lingua* di Pietro Bembo appartenuto ad Alessandro Tassoni (1565-1635)". Il volume assume, secondo Danzi, "statuto di 'postillato'" e "aggiunge una *pièce* di tutto rilievo alla conoscenza di quella che fu la libreria del Modenese"; il quale solea, d'abitudine (come confermato, del resto, dal Muratori), apporre 'glosse' ai volumi da lui posseduti. Il riemergere di "quest'esemplare" fa apparire ancor più "singolare il silenzio che avvolge nell'opera del Modenese il nome del Bembo". Nell'epistolario tassoniano — che copre "quarantaquattro anni" e consta di quasi novecento lettere — il "Veneziano" è infatti citato "una volta sola". Ciò può esser dovuto alla "distanza non colmabile" tra l'aristocratica e cristallizzata concezione linguistica del Bembo e la coraggiosa scelta del Tassoni che "aveva improntato" i suoi moduli linguistici all'"uso" e alla "quotidianità". Scelta, questa, approvata ampiamente anche dal Marino che apprezzava "l'indipendenza tassoniana dai modelli" e si scagliava contro "'l'ostinata superstizione di certi rabini' incapaci di scrivere 'senza la falsa riga . . . dell'autorità di chi che sia' (Marino, Lettera a A. Tassoni [Ravenna 1610])". E, cioè, "fuor d'indefinito", per l'appunto l'autorità del Bembo.

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**Massimo Lollini.** *Le muse, le maschere e Il sublime: G. B. Vico e la poesia nell'età della "ragione spiegata."* Introd. Andrea Battistini. *Studi Vichiani* 22. Napoli: Guida Editori, 1994.

In this book the author places Giambattista Vico squarely in the tradition of his Romantic interpreters and argues that poetic, not rhetoric (nor presumably philosophy nor philology), is the key to understanding Vico's *New Science*. The title refers to the author's intention to ground Vico's thought in the concept of the

sublime as defined by Longinus and rediscovered and elaborated in the Italian Baroque. This rediscovery, Lollini argues, was and is a counter-balance to the "ragione spiegata" which characterized Vico's intellectual milieu and still characterizes ours.

The book is divided into two parts, each with four chapters and a conclusion. The first part, *La retorica, l'immaginazione e la poesia*, places Vico's *New Science* in the context of the long standing tension between rhetoric and poetic. The second part, *La sapienza, l'ermeneutica e il sublime*, draws out the implications of Vico's poetics and places them in the context of twentieth-century studies of myth and hermeneutics.

In the first two chapters of part one, Lollini places Vico's thinking between Italian humanism and the "new rhetoric." Lollini argues that Vico's idea of *sensus communis* is the key to his thinking, and Lollini's goal is to establish that this idea does not derive from either the rhetorical or philosophical tradition, clearing a path for grounding *sensus communis* in poetic. Lollini claims that Vico derived his idea of *sensus communis* from Valla's *De voluptate*, which argued that the primordial experience of the passions was the basis of human culture. By assimilating Valla's ideas Vico was able to avoid the formalism that plagued both the Renaissance and the new rhetoric.

Lollini proceeds to trace the roots of *sensus communis* in the conception of the sublime in the classical, Renaissance and Baroque poetic traditions. First he investigates the oral nature of primitive poetry and its relation to memory, and finds in this relation the basis for the idea that memory is the Mother of the Muses. He then situates this idea within an archetypal tradition in poetry, which he traces back to Cicero's *Pro Archia poeta* and Horace's *Ars poetica*, and then brings forward to Longinus, Boccaccio and the thought of Coluccio Salutati, all writers whom Vico read.

After reviewing the classical and Renaissance sources of the sublime, the author turns to the Baroque tradition, which was Vico's own milieu. He first discusses Vico's letter to the young poet Gherardo degli Angioli as supporting his claim that Vico saw in the poetic sublime the origin of *sensus communis* and consequently of the ethical life of the community. But Lollini's major emphasis is on the Baroque fascination with masks and deception, and their relation to Vico's thinking about poetry. Lollini finds his key text in Vico's poem *Origine, progresso e caduta della poesia*, which he interprets as anticipating Vico's theory of cultural cycles. He argues that Vico saw in Baroque poetry, particularly in Marinismo, the age of decadence, the barbarism of reflection characterized by irony, the trope he described as falsehood "wearing a mask of truth."

In his conclusion to this section, Lollini shows how Vico used the poetic sublime, an idea originating in classical literature and developed during the Renaissance, to ground his own theory of cultural cycles, especially the creation of the gods. This primal imaginative act Lollini sees as an instance of the poetic sublime. Furthermore, he concludes that the cultural process from myth to religion to secularization follows the same trajectory as that described by Vico in his poem on

the origin, rise and fall of poetry. The decadence of Baroque poetry exemplifies for Vico the condition of poetry in an age of *ragione spiegata*, the age of reflection and explanation.

In the second section of the book, *La sapienza, l'ermeneutica, e il sublime*, Lollini addresses one of the thorniest problems in Vico scholarship. Is there such a thing as Vichian hermeneutics? Lollini's answer is yes, but he has a very restricted idea of hermeneutics. In fact, Lollini returns that term to its original meaning: the interpretation of sacred scripture. Lollini places Vico's thinking about myth in the context of the eighteenth-century disputes about the authority of Scripture and shows that Vico's approach to myth was entirely novel. Similarly, Lollini places Vico's ideas of an "ideal eternal history" and a *sensus communis* within the context of eighteenth-century Catholic apologetics. Lollini contrasts Vico's "ideal eternal history" with the theory of history proposed by Augustine in his *De civitate dei* and shows how Vico re-interpreted classical myths without either demonizing or trivializing them, and how he maintained a close connection between myth and the concrete experience of everyday life.

Lollini distinguishes Vico's idea of wisdom from wisdom as generally defined in the western philosophical tradition. He points out that for Vico wisdom has three attributes: eloquence, knowledge, and virtue. This wisdom coincides with the *sensus communis*, which emerged from the primitive experience of the sublime and was developed under the guidance of divine providence. The wisdom of primitive people Vico called "poetic wisdom" (a term which would have been an oxymoron for Plato). Lollini claims that for Vico both "wisdom" and *sensus communis* meant keeping in touch with this original, primitive, providential, sublime wisdom. But whereas "wisdom" was an attribute of the individual, *sensus communis* belonged to the community. It is wisdom which grounds what Lollini calls Vico's hermeneutics.

When Lollini speaks of a Vichian hermeneutics he means an interpretation of a people's myths according to the "ideal eternal history," the familiar Vichian cycles. Lollini contrasts this hermeneutic with that of Rudolf Bultmann. Rather than demythologizing primitive religion and its mythology, Vico accords respect to myth due to its role in constituting the *sensus communis* and thus the ethical basis of community life. Furthermore the subsequent development of culture can be interpreted in the light of such a *sensus communis*. Lollini finds the fullest development of this style of hermeneutic in the work of Hans Blumenberg and Emilio Betti.

Lollini's work is essentially a defense of the primacy of the poetic over the rhetorical and the philological in Vico's thought. In making this defense Lollini calls attention in new ways to Vico's religious and aesthetic milieu, and he illuminates some of Vico's neglected writings by placing them in the context of that milieu. Furthermore, Lollini makes a major contribution to the emerging debate over the religious significance of the *New Science*, both with regard to Vico's own religious beliefs (if any) and to its religious significance today.

Much in Lollini's book could be contested. If one were to argue for the primacy of rhetoric or philology in Vico's thinking, the evidence which Lollini cites could be



given quite different interpretations. Nonetheless, Lollini shows that the idea of the poetic sublime gives coherence to much of Vico's thinking about *sensus communis*, history, and religion. He has set the agenda for those who wish to find that coherence elsewhere, whether in rhetoric, philosophy, or philology.

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**Giambattista Vico. *On Humanistic Education (Six Inaugural Orations, 1699-1707)*. Trans. Giorgio A. Pinton and Arthur W. Shippee. Introd. Donald Phillip Verene. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993. Pp. 172.**

Questa meritevole traduzione inglese delle sei orazioni inaugurali vichiane mette opportunamente a disposizione del pubblico anglosassone un momento assai significativo nella formazione del pensiero del filosofo napoletano. La traduzione è stata fatta dal testo latino edito da Gian Galeazzo Visconti (*Le Orazioni Inaugurali*, I-VI. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1982), che costituisce il primo volume delle *Opere di Giambattista Vico* commissionate dal Centro di Studi Vichiani di Napoli. Nel volume tradotto da Giorgio A. Pinton e Arthur W. Shippee si trova un'utile "Lista delle fonti citate" e un altrettanto utile Indice Generale in cui vengono elencati i termini latini citati da Vico accompagnati dalla traduzione inglese.

Le orazioni vichiane hanno al loro centro un'idea pedagogica di tipo umanistico fondata sull'ideale della conoscenza di sé e su tre concetti fondamentali nel pensiero vichiano: la sapienza, l'eloquenza e la prudenza. I debiti vichiani verso l'umanesimo sono stati sottolineati tra gli altri da Enzo Paci che ha mostrato come già nel *De hominis dignitate* di Pico della Mirandola si stabilisce lo stesso tipo di oratoria che sta al centro delle *Orazioni vichiane*. Infatti, Pico elabora quella nozione di uomo come punto di incontro tra Dio e il mondo, tra la bestialità e la cultura, tra l'immanenza e la trascendenza che ritorna nell'idea vichiana della "medietà dell'uomo".

Vico trova ispirazione per la sua analisi dell'evoluzione della sapienza anche nella Bibbia; e anzi a questo punto si può affermare che proprio attorno all'idea di sapienza si determina la possibilità di stabilire un rapporto di continuità tra la storia sacra e quella profana, e di concepire l'idea della storia universale. Il tema della sapienza è al centro delle *Orazioni inaugurali*, e sarà al centro dell'orazione *De mente heroica*, letta all'Università di Napoli nel 1732, in cui la sapienza viene intesa in senso platonico come "perfezionatrice dell'uomo interiore", attraverso il ricorso alle diverse discipline, all'*encyclopedia* delle scienze, all'*orbis scientiarum*. Nel tema sapienziale accanto alle fonti platoniche e bibliche confluivano altre importanti fonti umanistiche, in particolare ciceroniane. In questa prospettiva risulta particolarmente significativa la *Sesta orazione*, in cui la sapienza rappresenta il riscatto umano dalla caduta, il legame della società dopo la dispersione primitiva,

attraverso l'affermazione della *ratio* e dello *ius*.

Per Vico la repubblica del sapiente non è il luogo esclusivo del divino e non si riduce al progetto di una Monarchia universale. Prevalgono in questa orazione i motivi ciceroniani delle *Tusculanae disputationes*, dove sapienza, filosofia e poesia sono considerate doni divini e indicatori insostituibili della civiltà. I tre elementi che compongono la sapienza per Vico sono eloquenza, conoscenza e virtù. Essa è dunque il *divinum inventum* di cui parla Cicerone, è la legge che dona vita alla società umana e rende possibile la revoca del peccato originale. Questa Sapienza viene a coincidere con il senso comune delle genti voluto dalla divina Provvidenza, e viene sacralizzata e vista nel vasto contesto della storia universale. Per questi aspetti Vico si può considerare il continuatore dell'umanesimo, proprio per la valutazione della sapienza dei poeti e dei giuristi e moralisti antichi sullo stesso piano e parallelamente a quella cristiana.

Questi momenti di incontro di Vico con la tradizione umanistica rimangono estremamente importanti per la comprensione dei futuri sviluppi del pensiero vichiano nella *Scienza nuova* con la concezione del senso comune e della "storia ideale eterna", anche se poi Vico finirà per superare l'umanesimo retorico della *sapientia* e per introdurre un nuovo concetto di sapienza che si fonda sul corpo e su una nuova idea di razionalità. La ragione per Vico non può essere svincolata dalla dimensione temporale che introduce un principio di mutamento collegato al corpo. È il corpo, infatti, la visione del corpo, che determina l'orizzonte temporale in cui il sapere si manifesta. Anche il cielo è un corpo animato agli occhi dei primi uomini e proprio questa visione del "corpo" di Giove e le passioni che ne derivano determina l'origine del mondo umano. Il riconoscimento vichiano che non si dà metodo se non in rapporto a un contenuto di un sapere particolare è di per sé sufficiente a dissolvere il "metodo" cartesiano fondato sul puro e assoluto atto della ragione. A questo proposito, va ricordato in conclusione che Donald Ph. Verene nell'Introduzione al volume sottolinea un punto che appare controverso nell'interpretazione di queste orazioni in cui, a suo giudizio, emerge già l'anticartesianesimo del filosofo napoletano, mentre per altri settori della critica vichiana queste orazioni rimangono nell'ambito del giovanile cartesianesimo del filosofo napoletano.

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**Sebastiano Martelli. Letteratura contaminata. Storie parole immagini tra Ottocento e Novecento. Salerno: Pietro Laveglia, 1994. Pp. 320.**

Il brigantaggio e l'emigrazione sono stati, com'è noto, due tra i fenomeni di maggiore rilevanza politica e sociale dell'Italia postunitaria, i quali hanno inciso profondamente, in particolare, sulla vita delle popolazioni meridionali. Essi sono stati fatti oggetto di innumerevoli indagini da parte di storici, sociologi,

antropologi, ma hanno suscitato anche l'interesse dei letterati, che all'epopea brigantesca e all'odissea dei nostri emigranti hanno dedicato romanzi, racconti, composizioni poetiche, libri di memorie, diari di viaggio, ecc. Questa consistente e variegata produzione è presa ora in esame da Sebastiano Martelli, docente di Lingua e Letteratura italiana nell'Università di Salerno, nel volume intitolato *Letteratura contaminata. Storie parole immagini tra Ottocento e Novecento*.

Martelli conduce un'esplorazione a tutto campo, andando al di là delle tradizionali distinzioni tra generi letterari, livelli "alti" e "bassi" dell'elaborazione artistica, ambiti specifici, invadendo anzi territori contigui, come quelli del giornalismo e del cinema, nel tentativo di ricostruire la mappa della letteratura sul brigantaggio e di quella sull'emigrazione. Anche gli strumenti metodologici di cui si serve, oltre che alla filologia e alla critica, attingono largamente ad altre discipline, come l'antropologia e la storia, in un fecondo scambio di esperienze e in una concezione autenticamente interdisciplinare della ricerca letteraria.

Il fenomeno del brigantaggio viene affrontato, così, attraverso l'esame sia delle memorie dei sequestrati, compilate da autori italiani, tedeschi e inglesi nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento, sia dei romanzi di Nicola Misasi e Francesco Jovine. E mentre i libri di memorie offrono una straordinaria documentazione sul mondo dei briganti, sia pure attraverso la particolare angolazione ideologica e le differenti matrici culturali dei singoli autori, le opere di Misasi e di Jovine mirano a dare un'interpretazione del fenomeno e a individuarne le cause.

A Misasi, in particolare, attraverso la narrazione delle truci storie di briganti, interessava rappresentare soprattutto l'identità storico-antropologica della sua terra, la Calabria. Non a caso la fine dell'epopea brigantesca, che lo scrittore colloca ai primi del Novecento, coincide per lui con la scomparsa di un mondo, di un'intera civiltà. L'abruzzese Jovine, invece, in alcuni scritti saggistici, che Martelli legge "in sovrapposizione" con *Signora Ava*, il romanzo pubblicato nel 1942, sviluppa un'approfondita riflessione, individuando una delle cause del fenomeno del brigantaggio nel ruolo svolto nell'Ottocento dalla borghesia, la quale cercò di sostituire l'aristocrazia nel possesso delle terre. E a questa classe sociale appartengono infatti alcuni personaggi del romanzo, alla base del quale esiste appunto, secondo il critico, "un'indagine storica di notevole spessore" (78), condotta alla luce del più avanzato pensiero meridionalistico.

Passando alla letteratura sull'emigrazione, Martelli mette costantemente in rapporto le opere analizzate con le posizioni politiche a favore o contro questo fenomeno succedutesi in Italia dagli ultimi decenni del secolo scorso fino a tutti gli anni Trenta del Novecento. Il libro di Edmondo De Amicis, *Sull'oceano* (1889), che ha svolto "un ruolo primario e archetipico" (108) in questo campo, è, ad esempio, una celebrazione dell'emigrazione italiana, in linea con le tesi di F. S. Nitti, anche se in esso non vengono nascoste neppure le difficoltà e le traversie affrontate dai nostri connazionali, mentre invece due altri grandi scrittori, Pascoli e Pirandello, rispettivamente nel poemetto *Italy*, compreso nei *Primi poemetti* (1904), e nella novella *L'altro figlio*, apparsa nel 1905, vedono nell'esodo una fonte di malattia e di



morte. Il secondo inoltre, influenzato dal pensiero positivista, considera l'emigrazione quasi il prodotto di una legge naturale e quindi un fatto ineluttabile.

Una posizione antiemigrazionistica, che Martelli ricollega al "settore più conservatore, politicamente e socialmente, nell'ultimo ventennio dell'Ottocento" (167), è visibile anche in altre opere esaminate nel libro, dalle novelle della siciliana Maria Messina, riscoperta recentemente da Leonardo Sciascia, a *Emigrati* (1880-81) di Antonio Marazzi, una "vera e propria enciclopedia dell'emigrazione" (152) in tre volumi, da *I due fratelli ovvero il ritorno dell'emigrante* (1893) di Giorgio S. a *Verso l'ignoto, il romanzo dell'emigrante* (1903) di Achille Salzano, opere nelle quali l'emigrazione è perennemente associata a immagini di malattia, disperazione, morte.

Un altro romanzo che affronta specificamente questo problema è *Emigranti* (1928) di Francesco Perri, di cui Martelli offre una convincente lettura in chiave prevalentemente antropologica. Anche qui le tragiche vicende dei protagonisti sono la logica conseguenza dell'atto traumatico dell'emigrazione, vista, per dirla con Ernesto De Martino, come "equivalente critico della morte", in quanto essa ha portato al distacco definitivo dalla comunità familiare e da quella del villaggio d'origine.

Ma, come s'è detto, lo studioso non si ferma al campo strettamente letterario ed esplora anche il settore cinematografico, dove rinviene un progetto di film sull'emigrazione del 1931, di cui resta il soggetto, *Il fabbricatore di città*, dovuto ad Anton Giulio Bragaglia con la collaborazione di Cornelio Di Marzo e Lina Pietravalle. Nel testo, che è un "concentrato di molti materiali della propaganda politico-ideologica e della strategia del consenso operate dal fascismo" (235), è evidente il rovesciamento di alcuni stereotipi dell'emigrazione meridionale. Qui infatti è l'Italia che diventa ora il paese del progresso, del futuro, dove i figli dei vecchi emigrati possono ritornare e diventare anch'essi costruttori, "fabbricatori" di città, nel momento stesso in cui si stava costruendo il nuovo stato fascista. Su questo progetto, che Martelli pubblica in appendice del saggio, in una stesura inedita, sono chiare anche le influenze della posizione nazionalista di Enrico Corradini e delle sue opere sull'emigrazione, che nei primi decenni del Novecento prendono il posto dell'archetipo deamicisiano. Corradini vedeva nel fenomeno migratorio un processo di decadenza della razza e auspicava il ritorno in patria degli italiani per combattere nella prima guerra mondiale e dare una nuova dignità alla nazione, dopo le numerose umiliazioni subite.

A una destrutturazione dell'ideologia corradiniana attraverso notazioni ironiche e umoristiche si assiste invece, secondo Martelli, in due opere di Massimo Bontempelli, al quale è dedicato l'ultimo saggio del libro, il romanzo *Gente nel tempo e Noi gli Aria. Interpretazioni sudamericane* (1934), che non a caso preludono al suo distacco dal fascismo. In quest'ultima, originata da un'esperienza diretta di viaggio in Sud America compiuto con Luigi Pirandello, lo scrittore assegna agli immigrati italiani in Argentina il compito primario di costruire una nuova identità nazionale.

**Grazia Sumeli Weinberg.** *Invito alla lettura di Dacia Maraini.*  
**Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1993. Pp. 273.**

A tutt'oggi non è facile trovare monografie o saggi critici rigorosi ed approfonditi sugli scritti e in generale sulla produzione di Dacia Maraini, come più volte anche la scrittrice stessa ha sottolineato. Lo studio di Grazia Sumeli Weinberg finalmente dà una rappresentazione completa ed esauriente di tutte le opere di questa ormai famosa scrittrice italiana per lungo tempo trascurata o fraintesa dalla critica.

Un'utilissima ed approfondita nota biografica, all'inizio del volume, fornisce dettagliate informazioni sulla vita e sulle opere di Dacia Maraini fino al 1991. La bibliografia, in chiusura del libro, suddivisa in bibliografia della critica e bibliografia generale, raccoglie nella prima parte una voluminosa raccolta di materiale giornalistico, di riviste di attualità e di saggi critici che rappresentano uno strumento insostituibile di conoscenza per chiunque si accinga a compiere lavoro di ricerca sulla scrittrice. Costituiscono inoltre uno "spaccato" della critica italiana negli oltre trenta anni che vanno dal 1962, anno dell'inizio della produzione di Dacia Maraini, ai nostri giorni.

Suddiviso in una premessa, sette capitoli ed una conclusione il volume di Grazia Sumeli Weinberg offre una panoramica delle opere della scrittrice che "incentrandosi sul problema della donna, si scostano dal realismo o dal naturalismo propagandato da molti critici, frutto di una coscienza unitaria dell'identità dell'uomo, poiché, di per sé, la rappresentazione del soggetto-donna implica una consapevolezza della sua frammentarietà" (XV).

Sumeli Weinberg, cosciente della difficoltà costituita dalla mancanza del distacco necessario a compiere un lavoro critico su un'autrice a tutt'oggi impegnata a scrivere, ribadisce pertanto la volontà di seguire l'*iter* della scrittrice, cioè il percorso cronologico del suo evolversi, senza perdere di vista i criteri unificanti di lettura di singole opere che, in un gioco di riferimenti continui e reciproci, testimoniano uno sviluppo costante nel corso degli anni. L'autrice in particolare evidenzia la scelta di Maraini "di un io narrante femminile" che si articola e si sviluppa in "tre fasi successive che vengono contraddistinte dal rapporto tra la graduale elaborazione di una propria concezione poetica e lo sviluppo degli eventi nell'immediato contesto storico sociale. Va inteso, naturalmente, che i tre momenti si delineano in maniera da riflettere l'impegno della scrittrice rispetto ai mezzi di espressione che più si adeguano al richiamo della propria realtà esistenziale" (30).

Il tema dell'alienazione contraddistingue, secondo Sumeli Weinberg, la prima fase in cui le protagoniste femminili da *L'età del malessere* a *Il ricatto a teatro* sono prive di autocoscienza e di autoconsapevolezza e osservano l'esterno con "lo sguardo di attonito stupore" (32).

Il secondo periodo è invece contrassegnato dall'impegno politico che giunge fino alla seconda metà degli anni ottanta quando "sulle macerie dei segni effettivi della lotta femminista" (33) Maraini si pone il difficile quesito di cosa significhi essere femministe senza più femminismo.

Infine la terza fase, priva ormai di fondamenti ideologici, "scava in quel filone della letteratura che mette a nudo l'operare dei fantasmi umani, degli impulsi e dei miti che a loro si affiancano, avvertendo, là dove è possibile e con l'occhio sempre rivolto alla donna, quelle motivazioni segrete e represses che li provocano" (33). E pertanto l'autrice rivolge la propria riflessione a quell'essere padrone del proprio corpo così come emerge, ad esempio, in *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* nel tentativo di conquistare quella che Maraini in *Viaggiando con passo di volpe* chiama "la sua dolorosa libertà". In quest'ultima fase il linguaggio diviene un tutt'uno con lo sviluppo interiore della scrittrice ormai lontano da qualunque apparato ideologico e accompagna "i ritmi interni, incensurati della psiche" (34).

Attraverso lo snodarsi dei capitoli e dei generi letterari che Maraini ha attraversato, Sumeli Weinberg compie il delicato e sottile lavoro di ricostruzione dell'io femminile dal "grado zero" dell'essere donna-oggetto alla riappropriazione delle tematiche del corpo e con esse della scrittura. Infine Sumeli Weinberg descrivendo il processo del farsi della coscienza e della scrittura femminile conclude: "Il femminismo che l'autrice rivendica nelle sue opere è atto stesso della scrittura fattasi corpo di donna. È vivendo intensamente il proprio essere donna, soffrendo attraverso di esso le ingiustizie della Storia, le incertezze delle emozioni e l'ignominia di una mancanza, che la Maraini dà inizio alla parola. . . . In effetti è l'assenza della parola che caratterizza il sentimento di alienazione dal proprio corpo. La donna, resa muta da secoli, è stata privata di uno spazio in cui avviare il processo di significazione. Oggetto di una realtà non sua, la donna è stata 'parlata' dall'uomo, è stata rappresentata a sua immagine. Essa ha agito spinta da forze condizionanti e si è ritrovata di fronte a un simulacro della femminilità, riflesso deformante del proprio io. Tale è il significato più profondo della mutilazione di Marianna Ucria, l'ultima eroina della Maraini, il cui mutismo, inteso soprattutto metaforicamente, risale ad antiche ed oscure radici, perse agli albori della nostra civiltà" (242).

Il libro di Grazia Sumeli Weinberg non solo dunque fornisce un quadro generale dell'intera produzione di Dacia Maraini attraverso la ricostruzione del percorso femminista-femminile della scrittrice, ma rappresenta, come il titolo stesso propone, un invito alla lettura di una scrittrice che merita davvero un'attenzione più accurata sia da parte degli addetti ai lavori che da parte di lettori interessati alla buona letteratura. Il soffermarsi da parte dell'autrice anche su opere minori o meno conosciute della scrittrice fa inoltre di questo volume un prezioso strumento di indagine e di approfondimento di tematiche insolite e non ancora dibattute dalla critica.

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N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1994. Pp. 175.

The obvious key to this volume is its title, which posits, in Italo Calvino's works, an immediate connection between language, with its ambivalent potential, and eros, with its joys and fearsome power. While Calvino was explicit about his concern for language, the voice of eros seems to be muted in his discourse. Or is it? Tommasina Gabriele's study argues that the erotic is central to the Calvinian universe.

The volume begins with a chapter that attempts to find a definition or description of Calvino's fiction by sifting through all the major critical assessments made of it. Gabriele's conclusion is that the critics hopelessly contradict one another in their evaluations of this writer's production. In addition, the author reminds us that Calvino himself, in his mildly perverse way, provided contradictory self-portraits, determinedly eluding all the attempts made to pin him down or individuate a constant in his work. Yet, some constants can be found in Calvino's writings, according to Gabriele: for example, the insistence on contrasting elements in all his fiction (18), a fondness for games, and a tendency toward mythification accompanied by a contrary desire to demystify, which Gabriele relates to Calvino's *impegno*, a widely defined political and ethical commitment (24). Calvino's concern with a moral dimension of writing was fundamental, Gabriele says, even though the circumstances and Calvino's own deceptive and playful statements tended to fuel never ending controversies about supposed Calvinian shifts from commitment to escapism and viceversa. In short, the book's first chapter is a very comprehensive review of critical literature that serves as a background to the topic of the volume: "the pervasiveness of eros in Calvino's fiction . . . and its close ties to his theories on language, precision, and individual and societal taboo" (149).

The reasons for the earlier critics' lack of sustained attention to the theme of eros and love in Calvino is attributed by Gabriele to a couple of reasons: on the one hand, the critics' easy interpretation of that theme as a development of the deeper Calvinian leit-motiv of absence and lack of communication between human beings, particularly between male and female; on the other hand, the very qualities of Calvino's writing when speaking of eros, such as lightness and understatement, and the minimal place he asserted eros should occupy in literature. Focusing first on Calvino's essays, Gabriele examines his evolving theory concerning the language of love, from an article published in 1961 ("Otto domande sull'eroticismo in letteratura") to one written in 1969 ("Il sesso e il riso"). The earlier Calvino declared eros problematical for literature, and called for silence on the topic, as he disdained equally its mythification, the abstractions used to speak of it, and the obsession with it manifested by contemporary culture; for him, the elusive quality of eros defied expression except through poetic imagery. In 1969, Calvino revised his assertions, still attributing to eros a taboo quality but asserting that the erotic dimension challenges the writer to reach beyond what is sayable into the realm of the unspeakable. In order to cope with the awesome power of eros, Calvino proposed projecting it into a cosmic perspective, and using laughter as an exorcism of it and as

a means toward the elaboration of a worthy, and ethical, discourse of the erotic. One could argue that, although Gabriele sees the two articles as being in contradiction with one another and with Calvino's own calls for precision and clarity in writing, they are indeed evidence of an artist's maturing, and of his evolving theory on the expression of love, not in the abstract, but within the context of a culture in transformation.

At this point, a remark must be made on the problem Gabriele's text presents by merging, without first defining them or at least commenting on them, a number of different terms that are far from synonymous: erotic, romantic, sexual, sensual, and the ubiquitous noun "love." Perhaps, a preliminary statement on the use of those terms by Calvino and, as a corollary, some considerations on the value attached to them by the critic, would have been helpful and perhaps revealing. As things stand, the reviewer is forced to use those same terms interchangeably, although with discomfort and the fear of lack of clarity.

Gabriele argues that, in his writing practice, Calvino moved from a conventional and stylized representation of sex and the erotic to a complex meditation on the relationship between the erotic and a language that may appropriately express it. The spiral movement that constructs and defines an actual shell seen as an expression of desire in the short story entitled "The Spiral" in *Cosmicomics*, becomes a metaphor in the essay "Il sesso e il riso," and symbolizes "the circular, circumlocutory linguistic technique for portraying the erotic" (67). In addition, in the short stories "The spiral," "Priscilla" in *t zero*, and the already mentioned essay "Sex and Laughter," Calvino traces a pattern of erotic movement from a fullness of self-love, which is a discovery of identity, to awareness of Otherness, and to an impetus toward the Other that manifests itself as desire toward self-expression, as a form of doing or action. At the same time, Calvino sees love as an upheaval, an upset that makes impossible any return to previous existential stages, with a resulting sense of loss. "Through Qfwfq, [he] can give love a cosmic breadth, and redeem the erotic as a powerful evolutionary force, as a powerful emotion, as the impetus toward expression, as the force behind all forms of creation, and the act of creation itself" (81). Yet, Calvino's cosmicomic fiction returns to the desolate awareness of the solitude of the individual, and the impossibility of erotic fusion (84-85), to the awareness of a gap between self and the object of desire that is also what challenges artistic representation.

In a close analysis of several short stories from the collection *Gli amori difficili* (*Difficult Loves*), Gabriele demonstrates that for Calvino the erotic "adventure" is invariably a crucial moment in the protagonist's own becoming, as it involves a struggle against societal taboos that make expression of the erotic difficult. The analysis of the theme of silence in "The Adventure of a Poet" is particularly subtle and original, as it links the protagonist's experience of love as "a world that goes beyond the word" to the writer's refusal "to use words 'by now worn and useless' for the erotic and other precious experiences" (113).

Faithful to his ambivalence and perplexity in the face of existence, Calvino

explored also the darker side of love. In her last chapter, Gabriele examines the conflictual portrait of love that often emerges in his fiction: the Other is a threat, and the self risks a destruction that is variously represented as a loss of reason, a loss of identity, a being torn apart, and ultimately as being devoured. This theme is most explicitly presented in the piece entitled "Sotto il sole giaguaro," where, paradoxically, the power of eros is connected to the power of language. The mixture of sexuality, exotic food, silence charged with meaning, and cannibalistic fantasies confirm that "the human erotic dimension is redeemed from its most banalizing, stultifying detractors and erotic language is revitalized" (148).

This volume provides very thorough documentation on Calvino's works, in the introductory chapter, the footnotes, and the bibliography. Its style is fluid and appropriately scholarly but devoid of unnecessary jargon. The flaws noticed are not many, although it is disappointing to find in the text a number of printing errors: "chameleonic" (14); "Kubla" for "Kublai" (19); "impego" for "impegno" (27); "guidizi" (31); "impactive" (32); "talismen" [?] (41); "recognition" (92); "Massaccio" (100); "plentitude" (101); "riaddattava" (105); etc. A rereading by the editor could also have eliminated more serious lapses, such as the use of an incorrect title ("Un giorno, Adamo" instead of "Un pomeriggio, Adamo" 19), and the infelicitous, or frankly erroneous, translations found on pages 30, 50, 51, 65, and 139.

Despite its few shortcomings, Gabriele's work has the great merit of having explicitly addressed an important topic in Calvinian studies, and of helping to open the way toward further work in this area.

Angela M. Jeannet, *Franklin and Marshall*

**Franco Zangrilli. *Lo specchio per la maschera. Il paesaggio pirandelliano*, Napoli: Libreria Editrice E. Cassitto, 1994. Pp. 167.**

Il volume di Franco Zangrilli, *Lo specchio per la maschera*, si articola in quattro capitoli che analizzano la funzione del paesaggio nelle opere di Pirandello, siano esse di poesia, di prosa o di teatro.

L'analisi del primo capitolo si muove lungo una linea di indagini che parte da considerazioni generali del termine "paesaggio" nella letteratura ad iniziare da Omero e Virgilio, attraverso il Rinascimento, il Barocco, l'Illuminismo, fino al Romanticismo. Il capitolo continua con una panoramica della critica pirandelliana sul tema specifico del paesaggio. Con tale rassegna Zangrilli evidenzia la non riuscita dei giudizi di testi critici, asserendo che essi non hanno "mai compiuto uno studio sufficientemente ampio del paesaggio pirandelliano" (16) per quanto riguarda la poesia e la prosa. Lo stesso discorso, continua Zangrilli, vale anche per il paesaggio nel teatro di Pirandello, dove "la critica si è limitata a osservazioni occasionali per lo



più sui drammi connessi col mondo della Sicilia" (30).

Nel secondo capitolo Zangrilli analizza la funzione del paesaggio nella poesia pirandelliana, dove esso non ha funzione "decorativa" ma piuttosto "rappresentativa" come elemento che "potrebbe contribuire non poco a rivelare un motivo unitario entro la produzione poetica" (39) del Nostro. Il paesaggio crea nella poesia pirandelliana lo sfondo ambientale. In molti casi ne costituisce "l'immagine centrale", funge da partecipe "alla nascita e allo sviluppo della passione amorosa o al raffreddamento di tale passione" (41). Alla maturazione del sentimento poetico pirandelliano corrisponde una sempre più originale visione della realtà del paesaggio circostante, che assume aspetti sempre più intimi, diventa spesso "mezzo efficace dell'espressione del sentimento morale dell'autore". Un paesaggio dunque intriso di "umorismo" che suggerisce una visione "soggettiva del poeta".

In "Pasqua di Gea" il paesaggio partecipa in ogni aspetto della vita di Pirandello poeta, con immagini primaverili "tenere e delicate" nel suo amore per Jenny, o come riflessione "sui mali dell'esistenza e sul motivo della morte" (54).

Nelle "Elegie renane" il paesaggio ispiratore è "quello invernale, riflettente il disagio spirituale e fisico" (55) del giovane poeta. Scritte in un periodo difficile della giovinezza di Pirandello, queste elegie evidenziano un paesaggio coperto di "boreale nebbia", "l'inverno dell'anima, la tristezza dell'esule" (55).

Nella raccolta la "Zampogna" il paesaggio partecipa liricamente nelle composizioni dove trionfa il sentimento panico di Pirandello nel suo accomunamento con il mondo campestre circostante.

Il terzo capitolo tratta la funzione del paesaggio nella novellistica, in particolare le novelle pirandelliane con occasionali riferimenti ai romanzi. Il tema centrale di questo capitolo è appunto che il paesaggio non funge da elemento decorativo ma piuttosto ha "valore strutturale e rappresentativo . . . e si veste funzionalmente della visione pirandelliana della vita" (69). Nella novella i paesaggi siciliani non sono mai astratti ma geograficamente localizzati e la loro universalizzazione avviene nel "funzionamento che raggiungono nel racconto" (70). Come è stato già spiegato a riguardo della poesia, anche per la prosa il paesaggio pirandelliano viene usato "umoristicamente" per evidenziare la visione affatto univoca che il Nostro aveva della vita.

Personaggio e paesaggio si condividono il ruolo di protagonista, ci dice Zangrilli, che continua con una descrizione dettagliata del processo tecnico narrativo impiegato da Pirandello per creare una unione fra i suoi personaggi e il paesaggio circostante. Il personaggio può mettersi "di fronte" al paesaggio, lasciandosi "meravigliare, stupire, o commuovere"; può "descrivere" il paesaggio; può contrastarlo con un monologo interiore, oppure può "abbandonarsi" al suo fascino (81). Da queste tecniche ne derivano "epifanie" che rappresentano "efficaci momenti narrativi in cui il paesaggio si interiorizza, sia nel mondo intimo del creatore che in quello della creatura" (89).

Descrizioni di paesaggi lirici di una giornata qualunque sono rese con uno stile non tradizionale nelle novelle pirandelliane, asserisce Zangrilli. L'alba, per

esempio, viene spesso apostrofata "squalida", aggettivo che efficacemente riflette l'umoristica contraddizione esistenziale inerente al riapparire della realtà quotidiana. Un tramonto, continua Zangrilli, è "ricco di significati in Pirandello" (100), "è prefigurazione del paesaggio autunnale", "il passaggio da una forma di esistenza ad un'altra", "accompagna il passaggio dalla vita alla morte", oppure "suggerisce l'abbandono di ogni illusione" (101). Il paesaggio notturno presenta altrettanta complessità d'impiego. In molte novelle esso funge da sfondo ambientale, in altre assume al ruolo di protagonista, soppiantando addirittura il personaggio o facendogli da antagonista. Com'è il caso della novella "Prima notte". Qui l'immagine della luna "non è simbolica, né allegorica. L'autore . . . vuol farne un vero e proprio personaggio, . . . spettatore compassionante delle sciagure umane" (111). Zangrilli continua la sua analisi sull'impiego del paesaggio nelle novelle pirandelliane affermando che non solamente esso "ridà umoristicamente l'ambiente naturale di un periodo storico" ma a sua volta il paesaggio diventa specchio nel quale "storia e civiltà dell'uomo" possano riconoscersi (116). Conclude Zangrilli che per Pirandello "la natura è un teatro in cui i personaggi recitano un dramma simbolico" (134) affinché si possa conoscere meglio l'uomo stesso.

Il quarto ed ultimo capitolo si occupa del paesaggio nelle opere teatrali pirandelliane, un genere finora rimasto quasi ignorato dalla critica perché "considerato piuttosto estraneo e casuale", invece è vero il contrario, afferma Zangrilli, in quanto il paesaggio "assolve spesso una funzione rilevante nell'opera di teatro" (135).

Nel teatro Pirandello fa abile uso del paesaggio, che assume un ruolo significativo. In alcuni drammi su cui si impernia la chiusura drammatica, esso svolge una funzione "segnica", in altri offre l'opposizione tra campagna e città, mentre il ritorno alla campagna diventa un *topos* ricorrente.

Sempre servendosi di esempi specifici Zangrilli mostra come in alcune opere teatrali il paesaggio, o elementi di esso, assumono una tale rilevanza da dare spunto all'azione stessa e al dialogo dei personaggi. In molti drammi pirandelliani Zangrilli illustra l'adesione che avviene tra il linguaggio metaforico dei personaggi ed il mondo campagnolo e contadino dell'ambientazione. Paesaggio "edenico" è quello dove si rifugiano i diseredenti della "Nuova colonia", come lo è anche quello in "Lazzaro", e in ambedue i drammi è il contatto con la natura che "trasforma" le protagoniste, la Spera e Sara.

Nei "Giganti della montagna" il rapporto con il paesaggio è ancora più intenso, continua Zangrilli, dove il mistero e l'esoterismo lo rendono allegorico del paesaggio interiore dell'uomo. Come anche nelle sue ultime novelle, nei "Giganti della montagna" Pirandello crea "un paesaggio surrealistico in cui e attraverso cui discute i problemi della sua poetica di artista maturo in crisi" (161).

In questo ultimo lavoro critico Zangrilli riesce in linea di massima ad essere conciso e chiaro nella sua analisi. Il lavoro ripropone una lettura dei lavori pirandelliani in parte già presentata altrove, e infatti il secondo e terzo capitolo erano già apparsi in altre pubblicazioni, come ci ricorda infatti il critico stesso nella

"Premessa" al presente volume.

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**Robert S. Dombroski. *Properties of Writing: Ideological Discourse in Modern Italian Fiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994. Pp. 204.**

Il volume di Robert Dombroski qui recensito è una raccolta di saggi critici sul romanzo italiano, da Manzoni a Calvino. L'approccio teorico si fonda su quel filone della critica marxista di derivazione althusseriana i cui rappresentanti più noti — e ripetutamente citati da Dombroski — sono Terry Eagleton e Frederic Jameson. Nella prefazione, l'opera letteraria è definita, secondo il modello indicato da Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*, "a site on which social conflicts are resolved aesthetically" (viii). Per Dombroski, i romanzi presi in esame sono "founded on the transformational power of the word. . . they all adopt the novel form, either as a means of affirming life in the face of a troubled reality, or as a refuge for a fragmented self" (x). Si capisce che le "properties of writing" del titolo sono quindi le resistenze che il testo letterario oppone nei confronti delle ideologie dominanti, pur rimanendo inevitabilmente soggetto ad esse in quanto espressione della cultura in cui ha avuto origine.

Nel capitolo su *I promessi sposi* l'autore sottolinea il tentativo di Manzoni di gettare "a bridge between the transcendental and the secular" (2) nello sforzo di reinscrivere la storia in un più ampio contesto religioso che possa darle significato senza tuttavia negare l'autonomia di scelta dei personaggi. Gli episodi analizzati da Dombroski sono due: la conversione dell'Innominato e il conflitto psicologico di Gertrude, in cui emerge la tensione dialettica tra esigenza soggettiva di introspezione psicologica e intervento soprannaturale volto a invalidare la libertà d'azione dell'individuo. Tale tensione sarebbe sintomatica di un'opera di transizione "from the absolute objective closure of historical romance and the absolute subjective closure of romantic biography to a narrative in which deviance and closure are combined" (10).

Nel secondo capitolo Dombroski paragona il testo verghiano de *I Malavoglia* a quello etnografico: Verga si pone di fronte all'oggetto della rappresentazione come lo scienziato, che intende descrivere una società in via di estinzione. E come ogni altra indagine "scientifica" anche quella di Verga non è veramente oggettiva, ma implica sempre un giudizio di valore. L'impresa dell'etnografo, come quella del narratore verghiano, è un'operazione di salvataggio, o redenzione ("allegory of recovery" la definisce Dombroski), destinata comunque a fallire, in quanto distrugge l'oggetto da redimere nel momento stesso in cui lo trasforma in testo. L'epoca in cui scrive Verga segna l'affermarsi dell'Etnografia, una disciplina che ebbe un ruolo assai importante



nell'epoca del colonialismo che si andava preparando. In quale misura Verga partecipa, con la sua opera, all'elaborazione di un "discorso" (nel senso indicato da Foucault, di un "sapere" che diventa automaticamente "potere", cioè strumento di controllo dei ceti popolari) sulla cultura delle popolazioni subalterne? Qual era il rapporto tra gli studiosi di tradizioni popolari e gli scrittori veristi, e tra questi e le autorità della Nuova Italia? Dombroski offre lo spunto per una ricerca che si prospetta assai feconda, anche se nel suo saggio questa problematica non è affrontata. Il capitolo riafferma la nota tesi di Verga scrittore "fuori di chiave" rispetto allo sviluppo capitalistico allora in atto, tesi che sarebbe forse il caso di rivedere, alla luce proprio della prospettiva "etnografica" proposta da Dombroski.

Al capitolo su Verga segue un interessante saggio su D'Annunzio, la cui opera sarebbe un tentativo di andare "beyond the degraded, valueless, disparate, and contingent world of industrial capitalism in search of a new vitality in old hierarchies" (45) per ricostruire un equilibrio armonico tra l'individuo e la "vita universa". Il modo in cui D'Annunzio si rapporta al mondo della tecnologia riflette il desiderio di ristabilire un legame tra la macchina e l'uomo, attraverso trasposizioni mitiche che mostrino una continuità, anche fisica, tra mondo organico e tecnologico. Al contrario dei Futuristi, che esaltano la civiltà moderna in quanto strappa l'uomo dall'abbraccio mortale della Tradizione, immergendolo nel vortice della velocità, "D'Annunzio feared most what futurism exalted: motion in itself" (53). I due elementi chiave della poetica dannunziana sono proprio la Tradizione e la Razza, uniche forze in grado di ricostruire un'identità sociale che il capitalismo aveva mandato in crisi. Dombroski rifiuta l'equazione D'Annunzio-Fascismo, e afferma invece che "D'Annunzio's mythical narratives provided a symbolic response to a concrete historical predicament, to which Fascism provided a large-scale political and organizational solution", (68) rinunciando però a quella dimensione utopica presente in D'Annunzio e nelle altre avanguardie artistiche dell'inizio del secolo.

Il quarto capitolo, dedicato all'analisi di *Uno, nessuno e centomila* di Pirandello, riprende in parte tesi già sviluppate dall'autore in *Le totalità dell'artificio: ideologia e forma nel romanzo pirandelliano*, pubblicato nel 1976. La lettura in chiave heideggeriana del romanzo di Pirandello, peraltro ineccepibile, non mi pare che aggiunga niente di sostanzialmente nuovo a quanto di recente è stato detto dalla critica marxista (vedi in particolare i recenti contributi di Romano Luperini e Vitilio Masiello). Trovandosi nell'impossibilità di sfuggire allo sguardo oggettificante dell'Altro, che blocca ogni possibilità di realizzazione individuale, Moscarda alla fine del libro "must desolve into the All. . . . "Being-in-the-world" becomes "being-of-the-world" (89-91).

Dombroski passa poi ad analizzare *La coscienza di Zeno*, un romanzo che è stato recentemente letto in chiave postmoderna. L'autore affronta la questione ammettendo che Zeno, rinunciando nell'ultima parte del romanzo all'analisi, finisce per accettare "the perpetual present of commodity time, in which all connections with one's origins and formation have been effaced", (99) ma rifiuta tuttavia l'etichetta di postmoderno per il libro in quanto "the epistemological ground of modernist writing

remains solidly in place. Zeno is constantly seeking to interpret his world and his place in it" (106). In effetti, Zeno non rinuncia alla ricerca, come fa invece Moscarda al termine di *Uno, nessuno e centomila* con il suo tuffo mistico nella natura. Continua a muoversi all'interno della società con uno sguardo estraniato, che distrugge "distrattamente" le certezze su cui si fondano le ideologie dominanti.

La prima parte del quinto capitolo, dedicato a Gadda, è incentrata su *La cognizione del dolore*, mentre nella seconda si esamina *Quer pasticciaccio*. Un testo fortemente sovversivo, considerato il periodo in cui è stato scritto, *La cognizione* nega tutti i valori, famiglia, culto della madre, ecc. su cui si fondava il regime fascista. Dombroski rifiuta comunque di leggere *La cognizione* come una condanna mascherata del fascismo, che è diventato ormai un luogo comune della critica. Semmai, "the only coherent political reading of *La cognizione del dolore* would have to regard the novel as a kind of exorcism, as a means of driving out the fascism within Gadda-Gonzalo" (123). *Quer pasticciaccio* si colloca invece nell'ambito della grande tradizione della letteratura carnevalesca identificata da Bachtin. Manca tuttavia, nel romanzo di Gadda il momento del rinnovamento che è tipico del realismo grottesco di Rabelais: "Gadda's carnival is a totally negative spectacle, with no prospects for renewal and no utopian longings" (125).

È nella narrativa di Antonio Pizzuto, uno scrittore importante ma poco conosciuto, che Dombroski individua il momento di passaggio dal modernismo ad una prospettiva autenticamente postmoderna, "whose formal features express the rationale of a new social system that marked Italy's entry . . . into the world of late capitalism" (141). Nel romanzo preso in esame da Dombroski, *Signorina Rosina*, apparso nel 1959, il punto di vista del narratore è simile all'obiettivo della macchina da presa, che registra fatti e personaggi, ma non è in grado di organizzarli in un ordine preciso. Il protagonista non è più, come nei testi modernisti di Gadda, Svevo o Pirandello, "the locus of consciousness", (145) poiché ha perso la facoltà di interpretare la realtà che lo circonda.

Dombroski esamina poi *Il Gattopardo*, romanzo e film. L'autore intende difendere il romanzo contro quei critici che condannano l'opera di Lampedusa per l'interpretazione statica, e quindi distorta, del Risorgimento in Sicilia. Dombroski mostra in modo convincente che la visione disincantata e pessimistica della storia data dal principe è vista talvolta in chiave ironica, come una delle tante voci nel racconto. Mentre nel romanzo la "Storia" resta comunque nascosta, tra le pieghe del testo, il merito di Visconti è quello di riportarla alla luce. La macchina da presa assume un punto di vista esterno, trasformando così il protagonista in un personaggio come gli altri. Dombroski mostra infine come la grande cura formale con cui Visconti mette in scena il capolavoro di Lampedusa, anziché essere un sintomo dell'atteggiamento decadente del regista, "recreates the melancholy that Lampedusa expressed through his prince's reflective soliloquies" (170). Romanzo e film rivelano, insomma, nonostante le diverse tecniche impiegate e le contrastanti prospettive ideologiche, un atteggiamento comune, che è al tempo stesso indice sia del loro grande valore estetico che dello spirito critico che anima gli autori:

"Lampedusa and Visconti join hands in evoking a world that has been thoroughly eclipsed by the exchange value of capitalism" (170).

L'ultimo capitolo ci costringe ad un salto piuttosto brusco, da Lampedusa al Calvino delle *Città invisibili*. Qui Dombroski affronta estesamente la questione della "retorica postmoderna". Il saggio si concentra sul tema, implicito nel romanzo di Calvino, dell'architettura, uno dei campi in cui il pensiero postmoderno ha avuto più risonanza, sia a livello teorico che pratico. Dombroski intende mostrare che le città invisibili di Calvino, anziché essere il prodotto di una attività combinatoria puramente testuale, senza alcun collegamento con la realtà storica, come vorrebbero i sostenitori del postmodernismo, hanno invece la loro base, per quanto "invisibile", nella materialità delle città stesse. Ogni città, come il ponte descritto da Marco Polo a Khan in un celebre passaggio, non potrebbe sussistere senza le singole pietre formanti l'arco che le sostiene: "The universal value of the concept arch consists not in its generality but, like the concepts need, labor, and production, in its specific referentiality" (178). In conclusione, secondo Dombroski, Calvino "uses architecture to provide the imagination, which is essentially private and closeted, a status in the material world" (181). È proprio l'enfasi sull'aspetto materiale del mondo e delle cose che distingue Calvino dai fautori del postmoderno, per i quali nulla esisterebbe al di fuori della testualità.

In conclusione, il libro di Dombroski è certamente un'opera di valore, che mostra una grande padronanza del linguaggio teorico, dal marxismo alla psicoanalisi, nonché una notevole familiarità con i testi della letteratura italiana moderna e contemporanea, che Dombroski legge sempre con acume critico. L'unica mia riserva riguarda la mancanza di una connessione più stretta tra i vari capitoli, soprattutto nella seconda parte. L'esile prefazione/sommario avrebbe potuto essere più ampia, dando così un disegno d'insieme più coerente al libro. Concentrando le premesse teoriche nell'introduzione si sarebbero potuti snellire gli altri capitoli, evitando molte delle annotazioni di ordine metodologico che costellano i saggi e tolgono spazio all'interpretazione vera e propria. Inoltre, come ho già accennato, non si coglie bene il senso della transizione Pizzuto-Lampedusa-Calvino. Se l'intenzione era di analizzare "significant transitional moments" (vii) nello sviluppo della narrativa italiana, il nodo moderno-postmoderno, sia a livello delle ideologie che delle strutture narrative, rimane in gran parte ancora da sciogliere.

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**Elisabetta Rasy. *Ritratti di signora. Tre storie di fine secolo*. Milano: Rizzoli, 1995. Pp. 222**

La Storia, osserva Elisabetta Rasy in *La lingua della nutrice* (1978), "è una noiosa burocrazia dei comportamenti umani, catalogata secondo miopi gerarchie"; non sa "niente delle donne e, per scusarsene, finge che non ci sia niente da sapere" (118).



Soltanto una ricerca archeologica, capace di spingersi oltre pregiudizi e avvenimenti certificati per rinvenire tracce dell'alterità e della sua emarginazione, può far risuonare il rumore di fondo dell'universo femminile, che il silenzio pubblico ha ridotto ad afasia. Ma *Ritratti di signora*, finalista al Premio Strega 1995, imprime un'ulteriore svolta all'indagine sulla presenza della donna nella letteratura. La Rasy prende in esame autrici riconosciute a tutti gli effetti dallo *status quo* — addirittura, potremmo dire, talmente inserite nel canone da aver fatto dimenticare che esse sono anche e prima di tutto donne. E, quasi per timore di ripetere l'atto di esclusione imputato alla cultura ufficiale, che sceglie appunto di non testimoniare quanto di estraneo e di oscuro insidia dall'interno la propria integrità, si sofferma sui desideri, le inquietudini, le sofferenze — radici segrete di quella grande trasformazione che ha consentito a figure femminili, prive di potere e di mestiere, di uscire dall'ombra per ricavarsi uno spazio nel mondo delle lettere.

"Tre storie di fine secolo", dunque, di donne che grazie alla scrittura sono entrate nella Storia: Grazia Deledda — tenace e creativa vincitrice del Nobel —, Ada Negri — poetessa pressoché ignorata a cinquant'anni esatti dalla morte ma in vita celebrata e quasi istituzionalizzata dal socialismo e dal fascismo —, e Matilde Serao — esuberante e spregiudicata nella vita, insaziabile nel narrare. Scopo del libro non è l'analisi delle loro opere — segni tangibili di un successo pagato a prezzo di molte umiliazioni ma finalmente ottenuto — bensì il racconto della loro infanzia e giovinezza, frammenti di un *Bildungsroman* e al contempo di un *Künstlerroman* in cui la coscienza femminile dei personaggi Grazia, Ada e Matilde si evolve parallelamente alla loro vocazione letteraria. Con questo percorso formativo inizia la sfida ai riti e ai miti della tradizione, segno inequivocabile di quella ostilità con la quale le tre protagoniste del libro della Rasy continueranno ad atteggiarsi nei confronti dell'orizzonte sociale e culturale del loro tempo, che richiede alla donna una muta e bella presenza domestica. Ma qui si delineano anche i presupposti della contraddizione che lacererà l'esistenza di queste donne scrittrici: il risentimento che le porta a infrangere regole e ruoli in cui non si riconoscono deve fare i conti con la necessità di un riconoscimento ufficiale, di una legittimazione da parte delle istituzioni e del pubblico. Soltanto così la scrittura diviene professione, e quindi — come ben comprende Ada Negri — garanzia di indipendenza femminile.

Le allusioni letterarie che convergono nel titolo del libro si prestano a sostanziare il faticoso compromesso tra regno muliebre e *enclave* artistica, che accomuna le tre vicende. Non è un caso, infatti, che *Ritratti di signora* richiami, rivedendoli, *The Portrait of a Lady* di Henry James e *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* di James Joyce. Nei personaggi della Rasy c'è ben poco dell'ingenua, innocente, vulnerabile Isabel Archer. Della "lady" jamesiana — la "signora" — non hanno il fascino, il ceto, la ricchezza (nel caso della Serao, nemmeno l'istruzione), ma è questa diversità che dà loro il coraggio del dissenso: pur soffrendo, la Deledda rifiuta l'ipocrisia rassegnata delle ragazze di buona famiglia per affermare la sua superiore intelligenza; nei suoi versi, la Negri rende giustizia al rancore per la modesta infanzia nella portineria, così come la Serao aggredisce il presente neutralizzando le avversità

con il fragore della sua impertinente risata. Dello Stephen Dedalus joyciano esse anticipano la scoperta del bisogno di trasfigurare il reale, di scrivere e di scriversi, pur non potendo pronunciare alcun decisivo "Non serviam" contro famiglia e società, perché ad esse si lega la sorte delle loro ambizioni artistiche. Giano bifronte, è la Serao che più delle altre incarna lucidamente la schizofrenia della donna letterata in un mondo patriarcale, decidendo di diventare al contempo una "donna all'antica e un uomo dei tempi moderni" (197).

Plurali e complessi — come le "storie" contro la monolitica Storia — i *Ritratti* non incrinano soltanto l'ideale di eterno femminile — la passiva musa ispiratrice dell'artista uomo, il sensuale oggetto del desiderio maschile —, ma anche il suo doppio rovesciato, ossia il rigido sistema di tassonomie criminologiche di Lombroso, per il quale sfuggire ai parametri della "donna normale" significa assumere automaticamente i tratti della "prostituta" o della "donna delinquente". Le intime sfaccettature delle protagoniste non sono rappresentate nelle analisi sociologiche di stampo positivistico dell'Italia di fine secolo: sono piuttosto confidate alla Rasy da epistolari e autobiografie, le forme più vere di romanzo storico femminile. Ne nasce uno stile che, specialmente nella sezione dedicata alla Deledda, ricorda quello di Anna Banti in *Artemisia*, quella fusione tra passato e presente, quel dialogo tra una voce femminile narrata e un io narrante che si offre quasi a testimone delle esperienze non dette di un'amica scomparsa, senza peraltro esserne complice. Alla Banti l'autrice del nostro trittico si lega, d'altronde, anche per la sua formazione di storica dell'arte e per la sua attenzione al rapporto tra verbale e visivo. Oltre alle esplicite riflessioni sulla pittura, la scrittura di *Ritratti di signora* mette in scena l'immaginario, che, con velate allusioni lacaniane e kristeviane, la Rasy aveva già caratterizzato nei suoi saggi come terreno privilegiato dell'espressione femminile — come "lingua della nutrice", appunto: pre-simbolica, pre-edipica, regno delle pulsioni non censurate dall'autorità patriarcale, flusso di sintomi più che catena di segni.

Scevro di toni propagandistici, il libro offre un documento di costume di un'Italia appena unita, culturalmente in ritardo rispetto all'ambiente europeo, e anglosassone in particolare. Cosa significa emancipazione femminile in tale contesto e come viene percepita dalla donna? Sensibile al rischio delle generalizzazioni, la Rasy indica una possibile chiave di lettura nei differenti rapporti che le protagoniste instaurano con la modernità: lo scetticismo e la diffidenza della Deledda, la ribellione della Negri, l'appropriazione aggressiva della Serao. Nel complesso, tuttavia, si delinea la lenta conquista di posizioni che a non più di un secolo di distanza — in piena postmodernità — sarebbero risultate obsolete: ad esempio, il carattere quasi indispensabile, anche per la donna letterata di professione, del matrimonio come liberazione da ristrettezze peggiori, o la necessità di superare pesanti pregiudizi perfino in quello che ora è considerato l'impiego femminile per eccellenza — l'insegnamento.

La Rasy riesce a infondere vitalità a queste figure femminili, rispettando la specificità storico-geografica delle loro voci. *Ritratti di signora* ha il merito dell'equilibrio: non vuole trasformare le tre scrittrici in femministe ad oltranza, non

le costringe a parlare il linguaggio etico delle loro pronipoti per puro gusto revisionista, ma nemmeno le condanna per non essere state — secondo i *topoi* e il ben più ampio spettro morale del nostro tempo — sufficientemente trasgressive.

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**Anna Maria Ortese. *Il cardillo addolorato*. Milano: Adelphi, 1993. Pp. 415.**

*Il cardillo addolorato* è l'ultimo romanzo che Anna Maria Ortese, ormai quasi ottuagenaria, ha dato alle stampe. Un romanzo lungo e complesso, narrato secondo i moduli del romanzo settecentesco, imbevuto però, di un "meraviglioso" che sfida tematiche occulto/decadentiste, rimanendo, tuttavia, di difficile determinazione. Tale meraviglioso è infatti associato ad un razionalismo di tipo illuminista, cioè a quella "lucidità della ragione" a cui la Ortese, paradossalmente, non rinuncia mai: neppure nei suoi momenti più visionari.

Romanzo complesso, quindi, che riassume i nodi centrali della poetica della scrittrice: l'insanabile contrasto tra Natura e Ragione, tra mondo umano e mondo animale, la negazione di un femminile visto come portatore di morte anziché di vita e la battaglia sempre in corso, e sempre persa, tra Bene e Male, qui situati nella Storia, in un susseguirsi di eventi che però della realtà — altro paradosso — hanno solo l'apparenza. E, infatti, sorge il dubbio che la Storia sia, anch'essa, mera invenzione, o, forse, che possa avere la veridicità fantastica di un romanzo.

Il libro prende l'avvio sulla fine del Settecento. Tre giovani signori, il principe Neville, lo scultore Dupré e il facoltoso commerciante Nodier fanno un viaggio a Napoli, allora al culmine del suo splendore. I tre facoltosi stranieri si inseriscono nella tradizione del *Gran Tour* secondo cui Napoli e il Sud Italia, risultano, specie per gli Europei del Nord, luoghi ameni e pittoreschi, ricchi di classicheggianti rovine degne d'esser visitate. L'esperienza del *Gran Tour*, infatti, secondo le indicazioni di Goethe, non è puramente visiva ma fa parte dell'educazione, la *Bildung*, dei giovani e induce nella mente dei viaggiatori segrete alchimie e irreversibili trasformazioni. Il viaggio inoltre regala apparizioni tanto folgoranti quanto imprevedibili e inspiegabili. I tre — Neville, Dupré e Nodier — diventano pertanto emblema di quell'Occidente razionalista, figlio dell'Illuminismo, che è progenitore della civiltà industriale e per il quale l'Ortese nutre sentimenti ambivalenti e mai completamente risolti. A Napoli i tre vengono in visita ad un ricchissimo guantaio, anch'esso modello d'un florido proto-capitalismo: don Mariano Civile. Don Mariano ha due figlie, una bimba, Teresina, ed una fanciulla, Elmina; quest'ultima di straordinaria bellezza. È di Elmina che si innamora lo scultore Dupré chiedendola subito in moglie.

Attorno ad Elmina, alla sua nascita e in realtà a tutto il suo casato come a quello del guantaio — villano arricchito — c'è un fitto mistero. Non si sa bene di chi sia



figlia. Inoltre, quasi a contraddire la sua bellezza, ha dimostrato fin da piccola una cinica freddezza. Ha infatti ucciso un Cardillo, un uccelletto che cantava rallegrando una sorellina morta prematuramente e, forse, proprio a causa del dispiacere che la scomparsa del Cardillo le aveva procurato. Quest'uccisione si colora, nel romanzo, di molteplici significati, collegati tutti a quel personaggio chiave che è il Cardillo: altro significante fluttuante, polivalente e mai definito. L'Ortese avverte il lettore, con quelle sue sibilline allusioni, mezze frasi e discorsi lasciati in sospeso e ripresi solo in successivi capitoli, che l'uccisione del Cardillo è una metafora: di cosa, comunque, non è ben chiaro. Mentre il Cardillo rimane un'entità misteriosa, Elmina incarna invece — e per l'ennesima volta nell'immaginario ortesiano — un femminile disappropriato di sé, un femminile che non si ama e si consegna al mondo come colpevole, *tout court*. Perché in cosa consista questa colpa, non è chiaro, e il femminile, l'essere donna, si tramuta così in un "inespiabile" marchio ontologico e in una negatività biologica. Come racconta il Duca, altro misterioso personaggio, a Neville, Elmina "non ama nulla di ciò che è bene; nessuna legge morale le consente di distinguere tra il bene e il suo contrario; e, inoltre, peggio di tutto, preferisce proprio quest'ultimo" (291).

Dal matrimonio con Dupré nasce una figlia, Sasà, per la quale Elmina non dimostra alcuna affezione. Ed è questo un altro dei dolorosi temi misogini della Ortese: la madre che è negazione del materno, la donna che rifiuta la genealogia femminile e che, come Elmina, odia la madre e non sa amare la figlia. È un femminile quindi, come s'è detto, ferito, auto-obliterante: che si pone nel mondo come colpevole. Elmina rimane vedova e si riduce a vivere in povertà con la figliuola, tanto che Nodier, venuto in visita a Napoli e fulminato dalla sua modestia e ritrosia chiede di sposarla. Elmina accetta senza entusiasmo, ma, alla vigilia delle nozze, Nodier decide di sposare invece Teresina. Si fa quindi avanti Neville che aveva sempre nutrito sentimenti piuttosto conflittuali per Elmina. Ed Elmina accetta di sposarlo. Ovviamente senza amore, di cui come sappiamo, la ragazza non è capace, ma perché, pare, debba provvedere al mantenimento di un piccolo mostriciattolo subumano, un certo Hieronymus Kappchen, o Berrettino, al quale la unisce un legame di sangue poco chiaro e un sentimento, circola voce, quasi morboso. Anche se Berrettino, questo stranissimo personaggio è già morto, come Neville avrà luogo di appurare recandosi alla tomba di famiglia di Don Mariano. Morto ben trecento anni prima.

L'enigma quindi, gli enigmi, restano insoluti e si moltiplicano, situati come sono in coordinate spazio-temporali che coprono una dimensione psichica e onirica del tutto a-logica e soggettiva. Eppure tutto accade a Napoli, nel momento in cui, in questa solare e panica capitale del Mediterraneo, il pensiero razionalista conosce — con il Genovesi, il Filangeri e il Cuoco — un'altissima fioritura, subito dopo la Rivoluzione francese che la Ortese richiama quale orizzonte storico, per quanto metta poi in discussione la validità della Storia, ma comunque orizzonte storico della propria narrazione, dopo la caduta della monarchia partenopea e tra diffuse simpatie giacobine.

Gli enigmi, quindi, rimangono. E dovranno essere i lettori e le lettrici a dipanare

l'aggrovigliata matassa della narrazione. Saranno infatti loro i co-creatori dell'opera. Ed è al Lettore, non a quello moderno, ma a quello che sopravvive — in un convenzionale silenzio interiore — al frastuono dell'età contemporanea, che la Ortese si rivolge direttamente:

“Dov'è adesso, per favore, il Lettore silenzioso nascosto nel cuore dei rumorosi tempi moderni? Il Lettore paziente . . . fornito . . . di una sua antenna privata per raccogliere il 'silenzio' glaciale dell'Universo. . . .”

“A tale Lettore — eccolo là il raro e mite gentiluomo — ci raccomandiamo: che tutto scusi, comprenda, veli un poco, ritocchi alquanto, aggiunga (se del caso) anche un po' di sale nella pentola delle lacrime”(392).

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**Silvia Vegetti Finzi, ed. *Psicoanalisi al femminile*. Bari: Editori Laterza, 1992. Pp. XVIII-397.**

In questa raccolta di saggi tutti al femminile in quanto scritti da donne su donne, sono presentati ritratti e biografie personali e professionali delle prime psicoanaliste gravitanti nell'orbita di Freud. Lo scopo del libro, come afferma nell'introduzione Silvia Vegetti Finzi che ne ha curato l'edizione contribuendovi anche con un primo saggio su “Le isteriche e la parola corporea”, è “di mostrare che, declinata al femminile, la psicoanalisi produce elementi di verità e di sapere decisivi in ordine all'epistemologia, alla tecnica e alla teoria” (VIII). L'ingresso della donna nella psicoanalisi è fondamentale sia perché essa si pone come oggetto di conoscenza sia perché “la struttura dell'isteria, il suo sistema di impossibilità, è lo stesso che attanaglia ogni donna, prigioniera di una anatomia che la civiltà ha trasformato in cifra del suo destino” (X).

L'isterica è quindi la rappresentazione vivente dell'enigma femminile, soffrendo nel corpo nonostante la mancanza di una causa organica reale. Dopo l'attenta analisi dell'isteria di Bertha Pappenheim, meglio conosciuta come Anna O., e di Ida Bauer, nota con lo pseudonimo di Dora e “protagonista del più importante caso di isteria affrontato da Freud” (27), entrambe considerate più che casi clinici co-autrici dell'impresa psicoanalitica”, si susseguono Anna Freud, la figlia; Melanie Klein, la madre; Marie Bonaparte, l'amica; Lou Andreas-Salomé, l'amante; Sabina Spielrein, la paziente; Helene Deutsch e Karen Horney, le allieve; Françoise Dolto, la sapiente; Luce Irigaray, l'eretica” (XVI).

Il libro sottolinea l'identità di genere come fattore fondamentale per il modo di essere, di vedere e di vedersi e testimonia lo sforzo delle prime psicoanaliste di adattare tecnica, teoria e lessico alla specificità femminile. I saggi sono essenzialmente biografici ad eccezione dell'ultimo sull'Irigaray definita eretica in senso etimologico, cioè “colei che ha fatto la propria scelta” (dal verbo greco

*hairesthai*). La sua è "l'eresia di una donna che ha scelto di pensarsi nel proprio sesso e che, da questa posizione decentrata, interroga, da parte a parte, la nostra storia e il nostro sapere, al fine di comprendere perché la differenza sessuale, la 'irriducibile differenza tra i sessi', non solo non abbia avuto modo di essere 'ciò che le toccava essere', ma sia rimasta *l'impensato del grande testo filosofico-politico* del discorso occidentale (373). Il saggio, essenzialmente filosofico, presenta il pensiero della femminista francese che, distaccatasi nel 1974 dalla scuola lacaniana a seguito della pubblicazione di *Speculum* crede "che la scena analitica, fondata su un dispositivo gestuale, peraltro completamente trascurato, in funzione di ciò che passa tramite la parola, sia costantemente minacciata dalla paranoia". Tale minaccia deriverebbe dalla "non percezione e dal non rispetto" della differenza sessuale e dalla conseguente "inflazione" dell'immaginario maschile che si "appropria di quel mistero nel proprio linguaggio, nel proprio specchio, ingannandosi e ingannando" (387). Con chiarezza inequivocabile la Irigaray rivaluta l'isteria scrivendo che "è stata e resta il luogo da dove viene l'energia non ancora codificata, carne, semenza dell'analisi. . . . È importante non distruggerla ma permetterle di accedere all'immaginazione e alla creazione" (357).

Gli altri testi che compongono il libro si avvicinano alla narrativa più che alla saggistica, il che "non comporta una caduta di rigore e di metodo ma l'ammissione (per altro già riconosciuta da Freud) che la psicoanalisi è inseparabile dalla letteratura" (XIII). Sono di facile lettura ed essendo centrati su donne alla ricerca della propria identità attraverso percorsi analitici finalizzati alla creazione del proprio io, introducono chi legge alla teoria ma anche al metodo della psicoanalisi. La diversità dei soggetti proposti mette in luce la poliedricità femminile ed i condizionamenti socioculturali che ne hanno influenzato la femminilità. I racconti sono quindi storie di donne protagoniste agli albori della psicoanalisi (campo in cui ancora oggi la loro presenza è preponderante), storie estremamente personali perché ciascuna di esse partiva da premesse diverse ed affrontava il suo io con diversa consapevolezza.

Non va inoltre trascurato l'aspetto storico del libro che ci dà uno spaccato della Mitteleuropa *ancien régime* ed una ricostruzione degli intricati rapporti personali e professionali intrecciatisi fra i membri del movimento psicoanalitico. *Psicoanalisi al femminile* offre quindi molteplici chiavi di lettura e soddisfa molteplici interessi promuovendo la decostruzione di un sistema e l'elaborazione di alternative di sapere. "A questo scopo ripercorrere le biografie di altre donne che si sono trovate a vivere difficoltà e contraddizioni molto simili alle nostre, può costituire un itinerario di formazione, non solo culturale ma esistenziale" (XVII).



**Brief Notices**

**Edited by Massimo Maggiari, College of Charleston**

*The Letters between Bernard Berenson and Charles Henry Coster.*  
Firenze: Olschki, nd.

Charles Henry Coster had been a minor public official until he retired and (as a man of independent income) devoted the rest of his life to the study of Roman antiquity as an amateur or, perhaps, semi-professional historian. He met Berenson in 1824 and they corresponded regularly until Berenson's death. One-hundred and forty-nine letters (apparently nearly the whole of the correspondence) are published here and carefully edited.

The letters are relaxed and amiable. They consist, for the most part, of the casual sort of news and sentiments we all write in letters to old friends. There are some comments here and there on intellectual issues. The book should be a minor note to Berenson studies.

John W. Dixon, Jr., *The University of N. Carolina at Chapel Hill*

*Dalla bibliografia alla storiografia. La critica dantetsca nel mondo dal 1965 al 1990.* Ed. Enzo Esposito. Atti del Convegno Internazionale realizzato dal "Centro Bibliografico Dantesco", Roma, 26-27 aprile, 1993. Ravenna: Longo, 1995. Pp. 269.

The volume contains twenty-three papers presented at the international convention organized by the "Centro Bibliografico Dantesco" in 1993 in Rome. The countries represented are: Italy (A. Vallone), France (J. Risset), Germany (M. Roddewig), Great Britain (T. Pisanti), Hispanic countries (F. Meregalli), Portugal (G. Lanciani), ex-Yugoslavia (A. Bressan), Scandinavia (A. Manghi Castagnoli), Rumania (A. Mitescu), Hungary (P. Sárközy), Poland (P. Salwa), Russia (M. Colucci), Ukraine (O. Pachlovska), Lithuania (P. Jurkevicius), Turkey (A. Gallotta), Persia (G. M. D'Erme), North-America (R. Caputo), Brazil (M. Simoes), Japan (T. Iwakura), China (G. Bertuccioli). Concluding remarks by F. Gabrieli, introductory articles by Enzo Esposito and index by Sara Esposito.

**F. S. Stych. *Boccaccio in English. A Bibliography of Editions, Adaptations, and Criticism. Bibliographies and Indexes in World Literature*, No. 48. Westport Press, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995. Pp. 254.**

This work, as the author states in the Introduction, "is intended as a working tool for scholars and students of English, Italian and comparative literature . . ." (vii). It is divided into three parts. Part One contains editions of the works of Boccaccio (1-29). Part Two contains adaptations and parallels of Boccaccio's works (31-59). Part Three lists criticism and references (61-210). Seven indexes (211-54) conclude the volume, which is an extremely useful reference tool for all students of Boccaccio.

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